AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル
6
【上】
著●川上 稔
イラスト●さとやす〈TENKY〉
電撃文庫

# 終わりのクロニクル

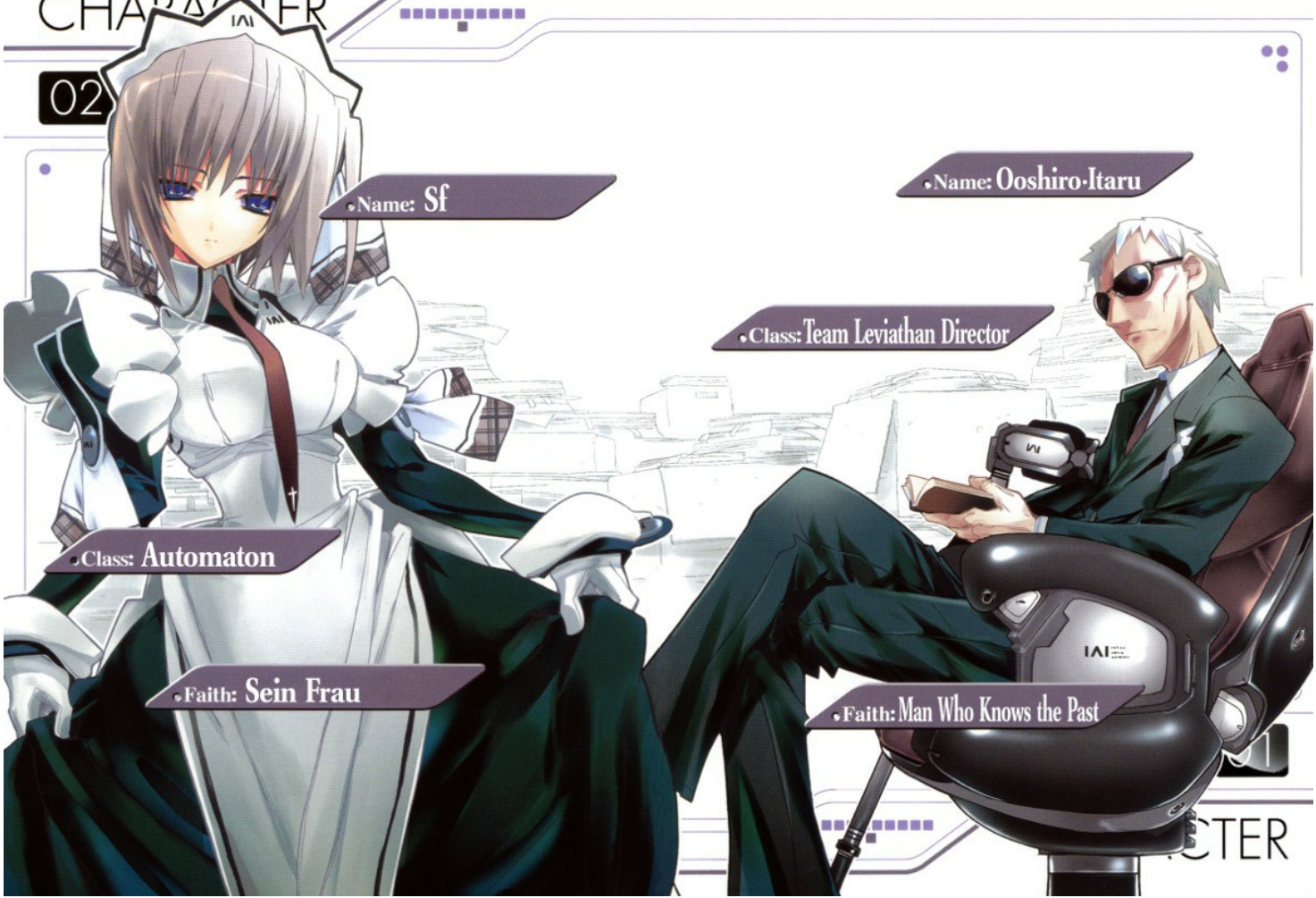
著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

## 6
## 【上】

**—Everyone.**
**Now, search**
**For an unknown truth**

The Ending Chronicle

# Act.06


Name: Sf
Class: Automaton
Faith: Sein Frau
Name: Ooshiro·Itaru
Class: Team Leviathan Director
Faith: Man Who Knows the Past

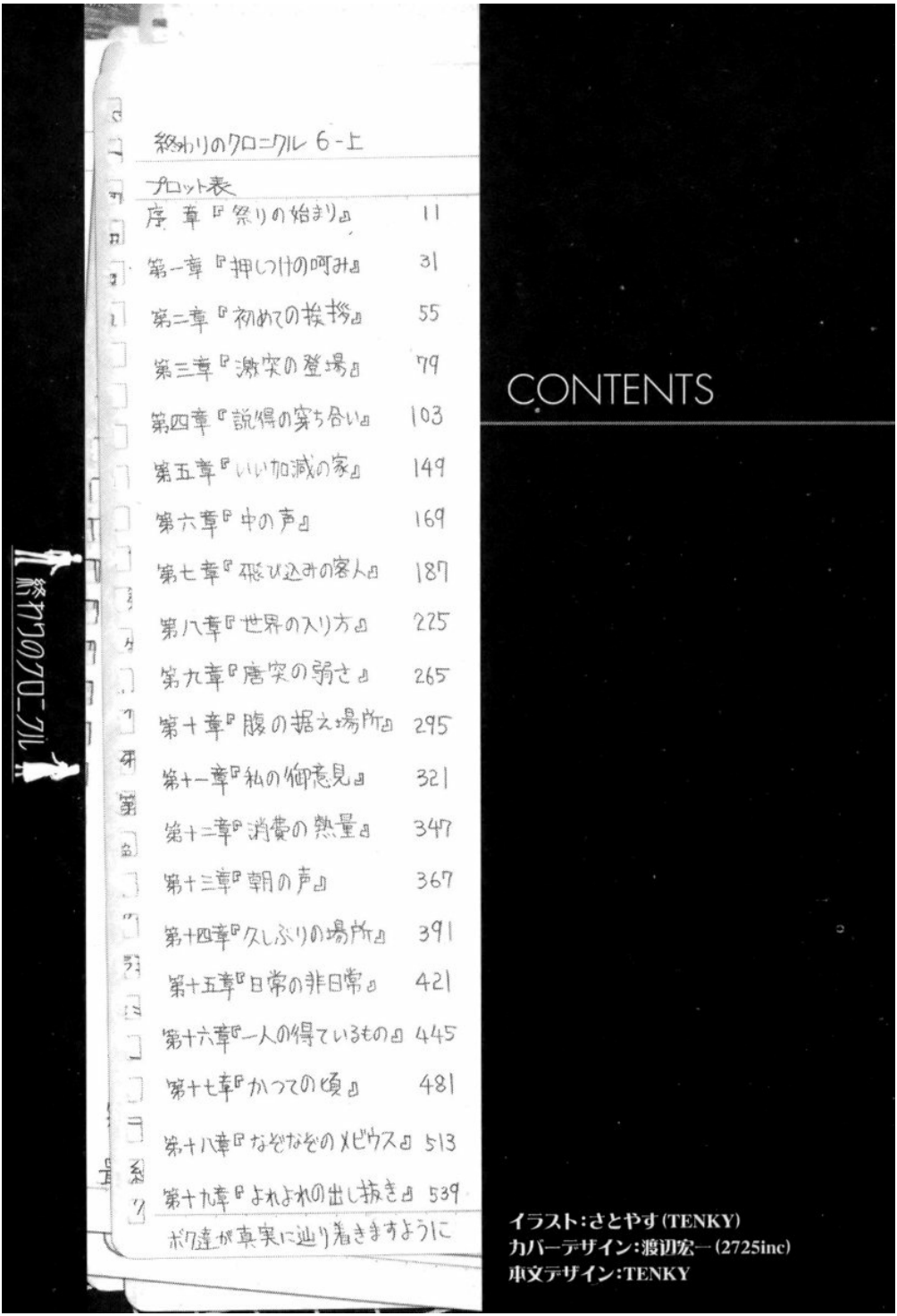
04

But the Concept War brought destruction on a scale greater than the rate at which the souls were recycled. That threw the ecosystem out of balance and expanding the territory of destruction was the only way to maintain the world.
To restrain the destruction, Concept Dragon Vritra was placed in the river between destruction and stillness. And to maintain the balance, the Concept Core sword named Vajra was placed in the river between stillness and regeneration.

## About 6th-Gear

6th-Gear was a world held between a space of destruction and a space of regeneration.
The souls of all things would move from the space of regeneration to the space of stillness. Upon death, they would return to the space of destruction and eventually shift back to regeneration.

T L W P
Taka-Akita Ladies' (?) Wrestling Professionals
Third Year Showdown Special Match
1st-Gear's Cruel Representative Champion
"Tiger" Brun
VS
Low-Gear's Blunt Trauma Champion
Ape Killer Kazami
Sponsors
Taka-Akita Academy Student Council
Taka-Akita Academy Art Club
Others from Taka-Akita Academy
Japanese UCAT
All of 1st-Gear
Referee
Careless Ooki
12-21
Round 1
"Repeater" Izumo vs. "Baldie" Boldman
THE LONG-AWAITED SHOWDOWN!!!!
Oh, honestly! What am I supposed to do!?
At the special ring in the women's bath of Akigawa's
Eternal Sunflower baths
Autograph session planned



# CONTENTS


終わりのクロニクル 6-上

プロット表

序章『祭りの始まり』 11

第一章『押しつけの呵み』 31

第二章『初めての挨拶』 55

第三章『激突の登場』 79

第四章『説得の突き合い』 103

第五章『いい加減の家』 149

第六章『中の声』 169

第七章『飛び込みの客人』 187

第八章『世界の入り方』 225

第九章『唐突の弱さ』 265

第十章『腹の据え場所』 295

第十一章『私の御意見』 321

第十二章『消費の熱量』 347

第十三章『朝の声』 367

第十四章『久しぶりの場所』 391

第十五章『日常の非日常』 421

第十六章『一人の得ているもの』 445

第十七章『かつての頃』 481

第十八章『なぞなぞのメビウス』 513

第十九章『よれよれの出し抜き』 539

ボク達が真実に辿り着きますように



イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

# 05

## ・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

**家族関係**

- 田宮家 — 実家代わり
- 佐山・浅儀 — 佐山の亡父
- 佐山・諭命 — 佐山の亡母

**新庄の両親**

- 新庄・由起緒
- 新庄・由起夫

**元護国課**

- 佐山・薫 — 養父
- ジークフリート — 図書館司書
- 新庄・要 — 新庄の肉親?
- アブラム — 実働部部長
- 趙・晴 — 若作り
- 大城・宏昌 — 技術者
- サンダーソン — 機竜乗り
- 飛場・竜徹 — 道場主

**Top-G**

- ハジ
- 戸田・命刻
- 田宮・詩乃
- 長田・竜美
- アレックス

佐山・御言

新庄・運／切 — 不断の存在

**生徒会関係**

- 大樹先生 — 担当・顧問

出雲・覚 — 会長

風見・千里 — 会計

ダン・原川 — ニヒラー少年

飛場・竜司 — ややエロ

**UCAT関係**

- 大城・至 — 監督
- Sf — 至の侍女
- シビュレ — 整備役
- ボルドマン — 連携役
- 大城・一夫 — 困った老人

**1st-G**

- ブレンヒルト — 美術部部長
- ディアナ — 独逸UCAT

**2nd-G**

- 鹿島・昭緒 — 2nd-Gの軍神
- 月読・史弦 — 開発部部長

ヒオ・T — おろおろ娘

美影 — 自動人形?

# Prologue

## “Beginning of the Festival”

It begins in a dark place
But in a lively manner
So people overlook it

●

The winter sky grew dark as evening approached.

Below that sky was a large expanse of land. Roads ran across it, woods and roadside trees grew on it, and it was divided up by white buildings and lawns lit by the setting sun.

It was a school, but this school was as large as a city.

That school was decorated with countless colors.

All of the school buildings were covered in colorful hanging banners that said “2005 Year End Festival”.

School would have ended by this time, but the windows into the classrooms were still bright and the desks and chairs inside were being used to make cafes or theatres.

Several stages were set up in the large schoolyard and countless booths lined the roads.

The booths made all sorts of different sounds and some were turning on electric lights for the night.

Someone looked out over those countless colors and sounds.

The person had climbed to the second floor landing of the emergency staircase on a school building on the north end of the schoolyard.

The student council’s festival stand was being built on that landing. The one who had arrived up the emergency staircase was a boy with sharp eyes. He held a bucket of plaster and a small animal resembling a boar sat on his head.

As he climbed the stairs, he looked across the schoolyard and let out a white breath.

“So the year end festival has begun without issue. Today is December 20. Seeing as the negative concept activation could destroy the world in five more days, this truly is the final festival.”

“Sayama-kun, I’m not sure if that’s a good or bad omen.”

That sighing comment came from a uniformed figure with long-hair who sat at the top of the stairs waiting for the boy.

She had a gray laptop on her lap and she was checking through the contents of the binder next to her.

“Have you gathered your things for going to Kansai?”

“Not to worry, Shinjou-kun. I do not own much in the first place. After we stop by the Tamiya house, I will still have plenty of time to

gather everyone for a meeting before leaving. More importantly…”

Sayama set down the bucket and looked to the festival stand being constructed on the landing. A girl in a track suit was working on it.

The track suit had the name Kazami stitched into it and she turned around with a hammer in hand.

Her gaze asked him what he wanted and he looked back and forth between her and the stand.

“Are you sure you do not need any help on the student council’s consultation stand?”

“Hm? No, we can handle it. Kaku has other business too, but Harakawa’s here. The two of us can handle it.”

Hiba quickly stood from the other side of the stand and frantically spoke up.

“I-I’m here too? You can handle it with me too!?”

“Why is that a question?”

“And you’re really just in charge of getting drinks.”

“Wow, these upperclassmen are a whole new kind of mean!!”

Hiba shouted back in anger and Harakawa’s gloved hand poked out from behind the stand.

The hand patted Hiba on the back.

“Don’t worry about it, Hiba Ryuuji. Paying attention to them will only drive you insane.”

“Y-you’re right, Harakawa-san! They’re the crazy ones! I’m perfectly normal, right!?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Hiba leaned on the emergency exit railing and began staring into the sunset, but Harakawa ignored him and stood up.

He looked annoyed.

“Don’t you two have business at the Tamiya house? Get going.”

“We will be going very soon. Harakawa, Hiba boy, we will be having a meeting in the Kinugasa Library afterwards, so do not forget Heo-kun and Mikage-kun.”

“I won’t,” assured Harakawa before reaching for the front panel leaning against the back wall. “But thinking up a countermeasure against Top-Gear really is a pain.”

He took a breath.

“I’m sure Japanese UCAT is trying to hide it, but American UCAT

has heard that we were sent blood samples from Toda Mikoku and Nagata Tatsumi of Top-Gear. And that the tests confirm they're the 'female version' of you and Hiba."

Sayama nodded. After a pause, so did the others.

As Harakawa had said, those samples had suddenly arrived by mail the other day and that had finally pushed the Gear reservations and other UCATs to action.

Top-Gear really was the opposite equivalent of Low-Gear.

As they thought about that fact and the fact that they had been sent the blood, someone spoke.

It was Shinjou.

And she suddenly lowered her shoulders as she did.

"This really is a pain. …Those samples had to have been a message from Top-Gear signed in blood. They were saying none of this is over."

●

Kazami nodded in agreement with Shinjou.

She inhaled some of the cold air of that winter evening and lowered her shoulders too.

"You're right about it being a pain. But that's why we have to do something. If we don't look into the past and figure out what's true, we'll have no choice but to go along with whatever Top-Gear says."

This had all started a month and a half ago.

The Army's attack had destroyed most of Japanese UCAT and revealed the existence of Top-Gear.

The Army had been defeated and many of its members, including Hajji and Jord, had been captured, but Toda Mikoku, the other Top-Gear survivors, and about fifty others had escaped.

Team Leviathan had never heard of Top-Gear, but it was a problem that Japanese UCAT had been hiding the existence of a highest Gear and hiding its destruction.

For one…

*…First, the Gear reservations have shut us out as they try to decide if they should accept the Leviathan Road when it was carried out with so much hidden.*

And for another…

*…The foreign UCATs are trying to place all responsibility on*

*Japanese UCAT.*

All movement from the Gear reservations had vanished, but the foreign UCATs had not fallen in step. Japanese UCAT had been forced to recover while receiving the protection of American UCAT.

Team Leviathan had prepared for the school's year end festival at the same time and this was the day the festival began. But…

*…The foreign UCATs called Ooshiro-san and the others to a meeting three days ago.*

Ooshiro, Diana, and Roger would apparently be going to an American UCAT underground meeting room in Yokosuka to explain the current incident and to explain everything about Top-Gear.

The meeting began this night and the activation of the negative concepts was approaching fast as well.

"Apparently, the foreign UCATs are furious. But Sayama and Shinjou, you two are leaving tonight so you can use this chance to complete the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear and look into Shinjou's mother's past in Sakai, aren't you?"

Shinjou nodded at Kazami's question.

Shinjou must have been interested in the nearly-complete festival stand because she watched Harakawa attach the front panel as she replied.

"I wanted to go a lot earlier. It's an overnight trip, after all. But Roger-san asked us to wait until he could secure a safe route using American UCAT's special division."

"True," said Sayama. "And besides, if the other UCATs knew before the meeting that we were contacting 8th, they would use it to attack us even more. Also, 8th's Concept Core is in Izumo UCAT, but 3rd-Gear's automatons and Miyako-kun have borrowed the third basement on down and refuse to let anyone else in. With Miyako-kun there, I am not worried, but we may have to negotiate with 3rd again."

"Right," agreed Shinjou.

Kazami looked a bit worried, so Shinjou smiled at her.

"Well, it's probably a good thing the meeting is happening now, since we only have five days until the world is destroyed. We can start tomorrow morning after confirming that Ooshiro-san and the others have finished persuading the other UCATs."

"Yes," said Kazami with a nod.

Her eyebrows were slightly lowered in resignation, but she was convinced. She then looked to Shinjou.

"———?"

Curiosity filled her gaze.

She used the hand not holding the hammer to point at the laptop Shinjou was typing on.

It was likely unrelated, but she decided this was her only chance to ask.

"Hey, I've been wondering… What is that?"

"Eh? Oh."

Shinjou was clearly unsure if she should tell her, but after a pause, she blushed and gave a troubled smile.

"A novel I'm writing for fun. Did I never tell you about it?"

Realizing why Shinjou was blushing, Kazami smiled bitterly but shrugged.

"Don't be so embarrassed. Have you forgotten I write my own songs? You get used to it."

"D-do you?"

"You do," assured Kazami. "Are you going to sell it at the festival? The library committee is having a doujinshi sale."

"They are?"

"They are." Kazami smiled. "There are some about you two."

"Wh-what kind of doujinshi!?"

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, I gave them permission to use our likenesses. They are selling a compilation of the newspaper club's serialized novel 'When You Can Hold Back No Longer' as well as quite a few fan-works. …Doesn't it seem like the people are supporting my reign?"

"Well, um," Shinjou started to say something and hung her head. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the world was destroyed."

"Now, now, Shinjou-kun. You must not be so negative. …Should I cheer you up?"

"No, thanks."

Sayama briefly stiffened at her rejection, but after a while, he hung his head, averted his gaze, and looked outwards along with Baku.

"You have been so cold lately, Shinjou-kun."

"That's because you get so fired up over the weirdest things!!"

“Calm down, calm down.”

He crossed his arms and looked across Kazami, Hiba, and Harakawa, who was reaching out for someone to hand him the next part for the stand.

“Whatever happens, the negative concept activation is in five more days. The other UCATs, the reclusive Gear reservations, and Top-Gear will all make their moves. …And you know what we must do, don’t you?”

Kazami was the one to answer him.

She reached for one of the stand’s supporting beams leaning against the wall and handed it to Harakawa.

“That’s simple. If any Gears reject the Leviathan Road because it was carried out with Top-Gear’s existence hidden, we have to restrain them.”

“Do you think any Gears will do that?”

“If they don’t do anything after holing up for so long, they’ve only wasted their time. A few of them are sure to step forward. …We’ll beat them down, so you two go investigate the past. Got it?”

She looked to Shinjou.

“You’re the only ones who can look into Shinjou Yukio’s past, right?”

●

Shinjou exhaled before answering Kazami.

“Right.”

She nodded with her eyebrows slightly lifted.

She understood what Kazami meant.

Shinjou Yukio was her mother and she was said to have betrayed Low-Gear and defected to Top-Gear.

“My mom was researching a concept creation theory and she had to have had something to do with the negative concept activation that destroyed Top-Gear, so if we learn more about her, we can approach the truth of Top-Gear’s destruction.”

She looked around and saw the others with their eyebrows a little lowered.

*They’re trying to be considerate,* she happily noted. *Sorry,* she added.

“You don’t have to give me that look. I don’t think my mom was a

bad person.”

Wanting to change the subject, she set down her laptop and stood.

She approached the nearly-built festival stand she had been curious about.

“To sum up, Team Leviathan will be using truth as a weapon against Top-Gear. We’ll look into what our parents did, look at the past from the proper viewpoint, get rid of any lies, correct what needs correcting, and stand on equal footing with Top-Gear.”

When she finished, Sayama gave some light applause and smiled.

“An excellent answer, Shinjou-kun. You understand exactly what we want.”

“Heh heh.”

She laughed happily before hearing Sayama speaking from quite close by.

“Yes, yes.” He started with two deep nods. “I too must use my last resort.”

“Okay, let’s calm down.”

She did her best to smile and he suddenly turned toward her.

“Calm down? Are you panicking over something, Shinjou-kun?”

“I was more directing that at you. And…what is your last resort?”

The others also looked concerned and were clearly wondering what this idiot was talking about now.

But Sayama spoke as if he had not noticed. He spoke in his usual, dangerous tone of voice.

“Well, you see, I have an absolute method of stopping Top-Gear no matter what kind of righteousness they claim.”

“Eh?”

He was saying he had a way to ensure victory against someone, no matter how right they were. But…

“Wait a minute. Low-Gear was the one to destroy Top-Gear, so can we really do something like that?”

“We can, although it will require treading on some thin ice. …But to get it all started, how about you take a look at this festival stand?”

She had no idea how the stand could be involved, but if Sayama said it was, it had to be.

She turned to look at it.

“Sayama-kun? I’ve been wondering. What is this strange stand?”

She gave it another look. The stand formed a sealed wooden box with three holes in the front.

The holes were just above waist height, the central one was large enough for a face to fit, and the two on either side were large enough for a hand each.

“It looks like the bottom of a guillotine.”

She tried sticking her head and hands in and found it was dark inside. She could see Hiba and Harakawa reinforcing the inside and she saw Kazami enter from the side.

She noticed a surface for writing near her hand.

She wondered what it was and heard Sayama speaking.

“This is the student council’s consultation stand. Someone might wish to consult us with something confidential, so they stick their head and hands inside so they can privately write and consult with us.”

“I see. …And what is this?”

Suddenly, she heard a quiet metallic sound coming from her waist which stuck out from the stand.

She also felt the cold air reaching her from the waist down, so she realized what was happening to her.

“W-wait, Sayama-kun! Why are you removing my belt and pulling down my pants!? Th-this has nothing to do with that last resort you were talking about!”

“What are you talking about? Of course it does.”

“Just so I know, how is it connected?”

He answered nonchalantly.

“If I am to do anything, I must be filled with excitement.”

“You’re horrible!”

Meanwhile, she felt cloth being peeled away and more skin being exposed to the air.

“Wah!”

She tried to pull herself out, but her head and hands were stuck in the holes.

“Ah! Wait, Sayama-kun! I-I can’t get out!”

“Shinjou-kun. …If you wiggle around like that, your butt will change shape and all my work to make a plaster cast will be for naught.”

"*That's* what the plaster was for!? And why are you trying to make a mold of my butt!? K-Kazami-san, stop him!"

Kazami and the others glanced her way but immediately resumed working on the stand.

"Well, it's just their usual flirting."

"Harakawa-san, is there something wrong with me if this feels a little dirty to me?"

"Don't ask about the obvious, Hiba Ryuuji."

*Wow, they're horrible too,* thought Shinjou just as Sayama reached for her underwear.

"Calm down, Shinjou-kun. We are about to leave on an important trip. It is only natural to celebrate the occasion by making a mold. Now, I will start by rubbing butter on your butt."

"Please use your brain before you speak!"

She tried to kick back at him, but she could not with her pants around her knees.

"Ah, darn. I-I can't kick right."

"Ha ha ha," laughed Sayama. "It would seem a one-legged kick is impossible. Just so you know, your embarrassed butt is quite cute, Shinjou-kun."

She found she could kick if she used both legs at once, so she did so.

She felt the blow land and heard something tumbling down the stairs beyond the stand's wall.

Shinjou took a breath, rested her head on her hand inside the stand, and sighed.

"Honestly, what am I supposed to do with him?"

"Just be glad everything's the same as always."

She glared at Kazami for that comment and the other girl smiled bitterly.

"Don't get mad. I'm actually kind of jealous."

"Hm? …Why?"

Kazami shrugged.

"Kaku would have been here, but he was called out."

"By who?"

"Well." Kazami looked up at the stand's ceiling. "Boldman."

That name belonged to the man who could be called 6th-Gear's representative, so they all stopped moving.

Kazami scratched her head and faced her again.

“Sounds pretty dangerous, doesn’t it?”

●

Something reverberated through the air.

It was not just a sound. The sound was only a portion of it.

Wind, motion, presences, shadows, and strength all formed a great harmony of reverberation.

And that reverberation shook something.

That something was a school lit by the setting sun.

The schoolyard and courtyards were empty.

However, two people stood at the leading edge of all those reverberations. The school had been transformed into a space of reverberation.

The two people jumped high into the sky, leaped from rooftop to rooftop, jumped down to the ground once more, and even ran up the walls using the windowsills as footholds.

When their paths intersected, a great metallic crash raced out.

When they moved apart, wind wrapped around them.

Their movements produced reverberations.

That abandoned space had become a battlefield of reverberations.

One of the two dropped to a courtyard between buildings.

He was a well-built boy. He wore a white shirt and gray school pants.

His hands wielded a large white sword as tall as he was.

He sank down as he landed and several pieces of paper floated around his waist and legs.

The papers had patterns written on them and they bent or stretched to receive the shock of his hard landing.

“!”

A few of them burst.

The tearing of paper added to the reverberating battlefield.

But the boy smiled at the loss of the papers.

“Okay. Those do a great job of absorbing the shock. Doctor Chao and the four brothers left us a great parting gift.”

He gathered so much strength in his crouched legs that the thighs of his pants swelled out from within.

He was preparing to run.

At the same time, green words appeared on the white sword's console.

"Can you keep going, Izumo?"

"And then some!"

With that expression of confidence, he bared his teeth in a smile and looked up into the sky.

A moment later, something fell right in front of him. It was the other person creating this battlefield.

Izumo called out the man's name.

"C'mon, Boldman!"

His words were soon followed by a great reverberation of destruction.

*The path you saw before you*
*Has blurred into several paths*

*—Those who do not resist because they claim they cannot resist are merely stopping themselves.*

# Chapter 1

## “Forced Reprimand”

You may cry out
But your mistakes will not overlook you

●

After Izumo landed in the courtyard, Boldman's attack struck him from the sky above.

A great sound of destruction was accompanied by a flash of lightning from the heavens.

The light struck Izumo's previous position, but first a wave ran through the gravel covering the ground.

That gravel instantly spread out in a circle in a wave measuring around a dozen centimeters tall.

The ripple-like wave cleared an area with a diameter of twenty meters, but it did not end there.

The ground revealed below the gravel exploded.

A great roar filled the air and shot into the sky.

Like an echo of the earth, dirt was thrown into the sky, creating a twenty meter crater.

It all flew upwards.

Stone, dirt, asphalt from a building's foundation, and pieces of the crust were all blasted into the sky.

The following shockwave shook the courtyard and sky even further.

That silent shock first created a spherical explosion of water vapor in the center of the crater. Next, it destroyed that sphere from the inside and expanded.

The shockwave pushed everything in the air and sent it flying a second time.

The shockwave hit the school buildings to the north and south and their walls looked like someone had taken a thick chisel to them.

The power pouring into the school buildings instantly blasted out the contents of the classrooms, broke through the walls, and obeyed the laws of physics by leaving through the other side of the buildings.

The contents of the southern building broke through all of its southern windows with a spray of shattered glass and the same happened with the northern building's northern windows.

Once the explosions settled down, all that remained were a great vacuum sucking in the air and the one who had caused the initial impact.

That attacker had struck the ground with a massive hammer.

He was a well-built man with dark skin and a bald head. He was currently shirtless.

His name was Boldman.

He wore an orange outfit resembling a Japanese hakama and steam rose from his body.

However, he was looking to the hammer he held in both hands. The large white striking weapon had a pointed front and back. It was powerful, but he was more concerned with the space between the crust it had struck and himself.

“There’s nothing there?”

Two reverberating sounds answered his low question.

One was the pieces of the crust raining down from the sky. And the other…

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you go all out, Bald Man. Is that Vima, 6th-Gear’s Cowling Hammer?”

“It is. Are you also going all out, Izumo?”

“Yeah.”

The answer came from the roof of the southern school building that had been half-destroyed by the shockwave.

Izumo was there, catching the falling earth on his raised white sword.

He sat half-crouched on the chain-link fence surrounding the rooftop and he smiled at the man on the ground.

“I am going all out, Bald Man. Oh, whoops. I used your true name. Sorry, Boldman.”

Boldman spun around and struck the southern building.

The tip of the hammer dug into the wall and light fell from the sky.

“Let’s settle this! Let’s redo the despair from sixty years ago and the showdown from two years ago!!”

The school building was smashed.

It did not crumble and it did not collapse.

That single strike sent the entire building to the south as if equal force had struck every part of the entire structure.

The glass, building materials, floor panels, desks, chairs, blackboards, and everything else flew south.

They all turned to rubble and scattered everywhere.

With the building gone, the setting sun shined through.

There were more school buildings to the south, but the one destroyed building created a large opening around the courtyard.

The reverberation of an explosion spread through the twilit ground.

And Izumo jumped above that ground.

He held V-Sw under his left arm, pulled some physical reinforcement charms from his pocket, and flipped through them like cash.

“Do you want V-Sw so badly you’re willing to interfere with our festival preparations!?”

“Of course I do!”

Boldman ran to Izumo’s landing spot with Vima held low.

His eyebrows were raised and he clenched his teeth.

“This is what 6th-Gear’s reservation decided. We know the truth and crimes of Low-Gear thanks to the Army’s attack a month and a half ago, so 6th-Gear has decided to redo our negotiation from two years ago.”

“And so you’re going to fight just like two years ago? To be polite, isn’t that jumping the gun a little?”

“But Low-Gear negotiated with us while hiding the important factor of Top-Gear!!”

Boldman shouted at the boy as if to say he could never forgive them. He gathered strength in his shoulders and his muscles swelled out.

“Ever since the Army’s attack, the other UCATs have been pressing Japanese UCAT to take responsibility for their actions, so Japanese UCAT can barely function! That effectively invalidates the Leviathan Road!”

“And so you want another chance?” shouted Izumo while preparing to land. “What a petty bald man!!”

“You are looking at this like a child!!”

Boldman swung his hammer up toward Izumo.

Izumo reacted by activating acceleration charms in the air around his shoulders. The physical burden of the charms was too much for a normal person to use them in quick succession, but Izumo’s defensive divine protection shielded him from all things.

The charms activated.

Several of them were torn to shreds as he swung V-Sw down at

the hammer.

The white sword and white hammer collided and light burst out.

Lightning shot down from the sky.

“Tear into him, hammer!!”

A shockwave flew from the tip of the hammer. That power would apply a striking blow to everything it touched.

But Izumo continued swinging V-Sw regardless.

He swung it straight down.

“Oh.”

The shockwave of striking force raced from the hammer, but the white sword sliced right through the hammer’s power.

The great strike split and spread to the left and right of them.

It surged outward.

For several hundred meters around them, the ground was torn apart and blasted into the air.

Boldman used all his strength to move along the remaining strip of land in the middle.

Izumo also moved forward with charms scattering behind him.

The two of them clashed on that straight line of footing.

“Ohhh!!”

Light raced, sound flew, sparks scattered, and every direction was struck or cut.

The land, air, light, shadow, and everything else became a target of their two different types of attack.

Slicing the shadow allowed the setting sun to shine in and striking that scarlet light scattered it until it vanished.

Boldman swung his hammer with heat surrounding his entire body.

“The basic assumptions of the conclusion and treaty from two years ago were wrong! Low-Gear wasn’t our protector or our helper! You were nothing but criminals pretending to be those things!!”

The striking force of the hammer tore into V-Sw’s cowling.

“We will not give into criminals! You need to return to the negotiating table in your proper place as criminals!”

“So… So we’re supposed to redo the battle from two years ago!?”

“Yes!” roared Boldman. “Do you have any idea what all of the reservations are thinking as we shut you out!? If doing nothing

means being forced into a restricted life by criminals, we would be better off once more pleading our case as victims of war!”

●

*Do you understand?” asked Boldman as he struck.*

He pushed Izumo back, struck again and again, and felt the impacts in his own body.

*…If only the Army had never attacked.*

“Sixty years ago, we were destroyed by Low-Gear and many of our people chose to obey you. They had nowhere else to live in this world and they thought avoiding war would be best. …And starting a new war could have destroyed this world and killed the ignorant people living here.”

But…

“You hid the presence of an even better world! And you hid that you destroyed that world! …If we had only known!”

Ever since the battle two years before, all of 6th-Gear had either chosen a normal life in Low-Gear or moved to the reservation.

They were similar to the world’s people, but they were still different.

Boldman had been born in the United States, had fought in a few wars, and had finally learned the truth from his mother’s will.

He had learned he was a descendant of 6th-Gear’s representative and that there were others from that world.

He had started to feel his nation’s wars were meaningless, so he had quit the military and sought out the others.

*…And those others wished for a fight on a larger scale than a nation!*

The aged and the weak children could not endure Low-Gear’s air.

They could always go to UCAT’s reservation, but that meant joining Low-Gear.

As time went on, their blood and culture would mix together until every last trace of their world had vanished.

But Boldman had a powerful body, experience in war, and the proper bloodline.

He had wanted to remain as true to 6th-Gear as possible and his position had made him a reliable power among the group that became known as rebels.

There, he had fought.

*…And that leads to two years ago!*

Two years before, they had learned the weapon containing 6th-Gear's Concept Core was being transported and they had worked with some 10th-Gear remnants to take it.

They had been thwarted and lost a few of their people.

They had finally given up after the destruction of a prototype Vritra that they had released in a suicide attack. That mass of pure destruction had been destroyed by…

*…G-Sp and V-Sw.*

6th-Gear's Concept Core had accepted someone of Low-Gear as its master.

After that, 6th-Gear had chosen to obey Low-Gear as well.

*…We had no complaints after that.*

If V-Sw had chosen to save this world, it was their duty to help.

*…But…*

*But,* he thought as he attacked again and again to push Izumo back.

What if their basic assumptions about UCAT had been wrong?

In that case, V-Sw was being used to protect criminals.

*…And we were used while being kept in the dark!*

Some of the others from 6th-Gear had died in their work for UCAT.

How was he supposed to explain their deaths now?

How was he supposed to console their families?

"If… If we had known the truth, we wouldn't have stopped fighting two years ago!"

After all…

"Desiring destruction over capture by criminals is the spirit of 6th-Gear! I don't want to see our world's concepts used to protect criminals!"

He swung down his hammer. It flew straight toward Izumo's face.

But it was not a sound of impact that reached his ears.

It was a voice.

Izumo's voice reached him as if welling up from the ground.

"Shut up!!"

A slash accompanied the voice.

"Enough 'ifs' and 'thens', you stubborn bald man!! Besides…"

With a metallic clang, the hammer was deflected upwards.

“This is all too confusing for me to understand, you idiot! Just give it up!!”

Boldman saw Izumo slip below the deflected hammer and toward him.

The sharp look in the boy’s eyes was enough for Boldman’s combat experience to sense danger.

However, it was too late.

A dangerous reverberation was added to the battlefield.

A series of metallic sounds raced through the remaining strip of land.

Izumo had begun a barrage of attacks.

●

Boldman held his hammer close and made compact strikes to defend and intercept.

He could hold the hammer near the top of the handle, but Izumo could not do the same with V-Sw.

A large sword could only be used for wide swings.

But Izumo attacked swiftly regardless. He sent more and more attacks from above or from the sides.

Boldman deflected the sword and immediately attempted some short range strikes of his own, but…

“!?”

Somehow, the white blade immediately shot toward him again.

He had no choice but to use his counterattack to defend.

Again, Izumo’s attack reached him.

The boy attacked quickly.

His attacks had been matching Boldman’s speed when he had been holding further down on the handle.

But Izumo had increased his sword’s speed even though he could only make wide swings.

How he did this was simple.

He had shifted V-Sw to its second form and used the back of the cowling for acceleration. Also…

“Are you using charms to help swing your arms back into position!?”

●

“That’s right. Now have another!!”

As he answered, Izumo sent out his sword and produced a metallic sound.

Just as Boldman had said, he had several charms expanded on the back of his upper arms.

By not using the charms when he attacked, he cut in half the time spent sending out the charms and he lessened the burden on his body.

He let V-Sw handle the acceleration, but the sword’s and his thoughts were linked. The large white blade would powerfully strike their enemy just as he wanted.

So he did not hesitate to attack.

“Oh!”

He moved forward along with his barrage. He pushed the hammer back when it shot toward him and he pushed the taller man toward the ground.

“Ohh!!”

He took one step forward, then another, and then a third.

“Ohhh!!!”

There was no stopping him now.

Boldman was leaning back and stepping back, so he could not stop the boy.

Izumo ran.

“Really, this is just pathetic!”

“What is, bearer of this world’s crimes!?”

“Shut up! Don’t try to run away just because things are getting inconvenient for you!!”

“This is called defiance! And… 6th-Gear must use this battle to prove to the other Gears that we did not know of your crimes!”

Boldman glared back at Izumo through the sparks.

“Low-Gear will soon be questioned or attacked by the other Gears! You will also be questioned by the other UCATs! And when that happens, we can’t let them think 6th-Gear agreed to any of it! …If you are going to die, don’t drag us into it, lowest world!”

“You can’t trick me!” shouted Izumo. “Only awful bald men lie about what they’ve done! I have plenty of hair, so I would never do

that! Besides, Chisato's in Low-Gear!"

"Are you going to die with this world for a girl!?"

"I don't want to hear that from someone who tried to die with 6th-Gear two years ago!"

Izumo gathered strength in his shoulders and pressed V-Sw's acceleration button.

"And it wouldn't just be the two of us who died! The plans for our future and our family would die with us! …They're all here in my head and I've even gotten my own permission for all of it!"

"That's nothing but your own delusions!!"

"What's the point of getting permission for a delusion!?"

He took in a breath and swung his body forward.

"You bald man!!"

He drove the sword forward.

Boldman swung his hammer to intercept it.

At this point, it was more like an equivalent attack than a simple interception.

Izumo did not hesitate to accelerate the sword. Instead of relying only on V-Sw, he sent acceleration charms across his entire body.

Speed filled his body and he surpassed the hammer's approaching speed.

The sword strike was going to reach its target and became a cut.

But just before that happened, Izumo did one simple thing.

"Here."

He forcibly slowed down and let go of V-Sw.

And it continued straight toward Boldman.

●

At first, Boldman was unable to react to the scene before him.

Something in his heart raised the alarm and his reflexes lessened the strength in his hands before his thoughts could catch up.

He felt the force of Vima's grip leaving his hands.

The hammer flew off somewhere and he lost his weapon.

But even at that point, he had not made sense of what he saw before him.

He held his now-empty hands forward and felt a weight enter them.

That weight was a large blade. It was a giant sword surrounded

in a white Cowling.

*…6th-Gear's…*

The Concept Core was sealed inside.

He had desired this two years before.

He had given up on this two years before.

This was what they were meant to bear.

*…And it is what I am meant to bear as 6th-Gear's representative.*

Briefly, he recalled the people who had fought alongside him two years before.

What would they have done had it entered their grasp back then?

But…

"…!?"

It was heavy.

Izumo had been swinging it around like nothing, but it weighed down on his arms.

"What!?"

He was strong enough to swing his hammer as he pleased and he had the greatest physical strength of the 6th-Gear survivors, but he could not bear the weight of this sword.

His arms bent downwards and threatened to break. As he tried to bear it, his back threatened to bend at the waist.

*…What is this?*

"The will of 6th-Gear's Concept Core still thinks of me as its master."

He heard a voice from directly ahead.

Izumo stood in front of him as he lowered his hips and planted his feet firmly on the ground to bear the weight in his arms.

The boy wiped sweat from his brow and turned his powerful gaze toward Boldman.

"6th-Gear's Concept Core loves 6th-Gear."

"Then why this weight?"

"You don't know?" asked Izumo. "Your thoughts end with killing yourselves. It was the same two years ago. And now that things have gotten inconvenient, you're trying to escape. But does 6th-Gear's destruction and rebirth say things end with death or that you can escape it so easily?"

"…"

“Two years ago, you were at least trying to die, but now you’re not even doing that. V-Sw might have lent you its power back then to tell you not to die, but it’s never going to give you anything now.”

Boldman gulped.

“So when we tried to make that suicide attack with Vritra, it was V-Sw as well as you that saved us?”

“Think about it yourself. And just to be clear, it was Chisato that pulled me onward back then.” Izumo smiled bitterly. “Chisato and I aren’t going to die with this world. We’ll just smash and fix anything wrong with others or ourselves. That’s why V-Sw will go along with me. …That’s right. With the 6th-Gear way of doing things, there is no running or deceiving.”

Izumo clenched his fist.

He swung that fist, but Boldman heard a single voice and saw some words first.

The voice was Izumo’s.

“Thanks to the Army, things have gotten pretty exciting.”

The words were what he saw on V-Sw’s console when he lowered his gaze.

The green words glowed and seemed to dance.

“Heavy, isn’t it?”

As soon as he nodded, an impact sent Boldman’s mind into the darkness.

Meanwhile, he felt a great weight vanish from his arms.

●

Winter days ended quickly.

The afternoon sun moved to the west and set in no time at all.

Just before it fully set, its light covered a white building.

It had a large parking lot, it stretched out to the east and west, and it had a large cross on it.

It was a general hospital.

Afternoon examinations were over, so visitors were the only people who would walk in.

The evening light filled the lobby through the wide glass entrance.

The lobby was quiet.

The counter’s curtain was closed and only two people sat on the long waiting room bench.

Both of them wore black.

The taller one, a man in black pajamas, stared forward while ignoring the woman in a black maid uniform sitting to his left.

The maid also stared at the counter's closed curtain without looking to the man.

They exchanged words instead of gazes.

The man opened his mouth first.

"Sf, I hear Boldman and Izumo fought."

"Tes. I believe this is the first reaction to the truth revealed by the Army, Itaru-sama."

"I see." Some scorn filled Itaru's voice. "This is bound to be tough for Team Leviathan. As Low-Gear's representatives, they will be asked to take responsibility for a truth they weren't even aware of. …I'm glad to hear they will be having so much trouble."

He spat out a breath and corrected his posture to look at the empty counter again.

"Well? Diana was here earlier, wasn't she?"

"Tes. She will be attending the meeting with the foreign UCATs, so she stopped by to greet me."

"I see." Itaru nodded and exaggeratedly raised his hands. "Things sure are boring without an awful woman around. Don't you think, Sf? It's so refreshing."

"Tes. Itaru-sama, as an automaton, I do not understand the idea of 'boring', but I was able to make a statistical prediction using your past comments and I have already taken care of that."

Itaru remained facing forward.

"What do you mean by that? Did German UCAT give you some kind of entertainment function?"

"No, German UCAT is a strict organization. There is no room for anything like entertainment."

The eyes below Itaru's sunglasses stared into the distance, but Sf did not notice as she was looking forward. She reached below her apron and pulled out a small metal box with a green button on it.

"In case the worst case scenario of 'boring' occurred, I recruited IAI Performance Art Division's famous Butoh group named 'Nerves of Squeal'. They mainly wait above the ceiling and enter the room below while making strange noises in order to calm people's nerves when they are in a tense situation, such as performing surgery. Or

so I hear."

"Explain to me why you don't know that for sure."

Meanwhile, a strange voice and a scream came from down the hallway.

After the scream, the owner of the strange voice spoke.

"Don't worry! Don't worry! Do not worry a bit! Look, there's nothing to be afraid of. Hee heh heh heh heh. I'm not letting go now!"

As the strange voice and scream echoed around them, Sf spoke while still facing forward.

"I can now say it for sure. …They jump down from the ceiling and that happens."

"I'm going to change the subject for my own safety," said Itaru.

He lightly adjusted his position in the seat and looked up at the ceiling as if in thought.

Someone colored white was looking down at him through a gap in the ceiling panels.

As Itaru's sunglasses met the man's gaze, his cheeks grew a bit red and he gave a quick wave before slowly vanishing into the darkness.

The ceiling panel closed and Itaru finally spoke.

"This world has become a terrible place."

"Because UCAT defeated the Army? Or because the past lost to the Army?"

"Neither."

Itaru looked up at the closed ceiling.

"Hajji and the rest of the Army are being held in cells made in the open floor of the fifth and sixth basements, but Tatsumi, Alex, and the other fifty or so of the Army's main force are still missing. Also…"

"The foreign UCATs have begun protesting the newly revealed past. Some are suggesting shifting to the Army's way of thinking and others are suggesting stripping Japanese UCAT of all authority."

And…

"All communications and interaction with the Gear reservations – especially 1st, 6th, and 10th – have been cut off. Parts of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th are also taking covert action."

As he listened to Sf, Itaru opened his mouth a bit in what could be

called a smile or discontent.

"How boring. Every bit of it is completely predictable. You can sum it all up by saying that Japanese UCAT is taking the blame for its selfish actions in the past and present. It's a target of the Gears' resentment and the other UCATs' desire to hold someone responsible. And thus the Leviathan Road is no longer valid."

"Itaru-sama, is that what you call 'boring'?"

He adjusted his posture without nodding.

He leaned forward, rested his elbow on his lap, placed his chin on that hand, and spoke with annoyance in his voice.

"My old man and Roger will have already left for the meeting with the other UCATs. Diana will be arriving after them."

"Will they find a solution to the other UCATs' desire to hold someone responsible?"

"No. They'll just be manipulating the meeting. They trust those kids, so they'll avoid taking any direct action."

He added "how boring" again, let out a deep breath from his gut, and continued in annoyance.

"But the thing about boring situations is that they're the harbinger of more interesting things to come. So, Sf, if those three are going to delay that meeting…"

"Tes. Are you saying the Gear reservations will make their move just like 6th-Gear?"

"Yes." He let his voice fall to the floor. "But I doubt many of them will act. Once the first few Gears are crushed, the others will realize their place. I'd say only one or two more will do anything."

"Tes. And if they are restrained, I believe the Gear reservations will need to rethink their current viewpoint."

"Yes," agreed Itaru before turning toward Sf. "Which Gears will ask for a rematch? And which ones will ask for a renegotiation? And which ones will make up their own minds after seeing that?"

"Tes. Diana-sama gave me these to learn that."

Sf stood up and pulled a few objects from below her apron.

"Origami cranes? And five of them?"

He quickly noticed one of them was crushed. It looked like it had bent its own wings forward.

"This one was crushed as soon as Boldman-sama lost."

"…"

Itaru's questioning eyes observed the cranes and Sf nodded back at him. She then bent her back a little.

"Tes. Itaru-sama, the world is moving in an interesting direction, but where are you headed?"

"Hah. I'm going to seek out the most boring direction, of course."

Sf responded expressionlessly to her master's words.

"Tes. I have determined I am fortunate to have a master who does not follow the general trends the masses. And I am sure everyone else will thank you. They are only able to continue in that interesting direction because you are singlehandedly gathering up every boring part of the world."

Sf bowed and held the white cranes up into the crimson light reaching them through the lobby entrance.

"If you are ever unable to endure the boringness, please rely on me. I do not understand the feeling of 'boring', so I have determined I can take on as much of it as you need."

She took a breath.

"So tell me what you desire, Itaru-sama. What is it you desire to make the world a more interesting place?"

# Chapter 2

## “First Greeting”

A close relationship
That feels out of reach
Is one whose distance you have misjudged

●

The setting sun shined on a road.

The single lane road cut east to west through a residential area. Barely any cars drove down it, the sunlight was already growing purple, and the streetlights were coming on.

The sounds of the giant school to the east reached the road. The sounds were of hammers and metal.

With those sounds in the distance, two people walked below the spots of light from the streetlights.

A boy in a suit and a boy in a school uniform were walking west toward the vanishing purple light.

The boy in the suit and the small animal on his head turned to the boy in a uniform.

“It has been a while since we visited the Tamiya house, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it has, Sayama-kun. After the Army’s attack before the school festival, we’ve just been too busy, haven’t we? We’ve spoken with them on the phone or passed them by on the street, though.”

Shinjou’s lips moved as if counting the days.

“I haven’t gotten a talk from Ryouko-san in about a month and a half.”

“I do not think that is her giving you a talk. That is simply who she is.”

“Oh? You know a lot about her, Sayama-kun.”

She gave a teasing glare, but he ignored it and gave a deep nod.

“I know more about you than her now, Shinjou-kun.”

“Yes, yes.”

Shinjou agreed to avoid any trouble, but her eyebrows suddenly lowered.

“But are you okay? We’re going to be searching for a lot of different documents at the Tamiya house, aren’t we?”

“Yes. There should be some things from the past in the unopened room I used to live in with my mother. I want to look through this to prepare for the meeting in the Kinugasa Library before we leave for Kansai tonight.”

His expression was a bit stiff as he talked about his mother.

Once she realized he was not going to say anything more, Shinjou moved in closer to him.

“Let’s do our best.”

*Is it my duty to push those words onto him?* she wondered.

He nodded and looked down at the black binder she held.

She gave him a questioning look and he crossed his arms.

“Shinjou-kun, can I do anything to help with the novel you are writing?”

He was diverting the conversation away from the past.

She knew that, so she hesitated before shaking her head.

“No, you don’t have to help. It’s going really well.”

She smiled and held the binder closer to her chest. She thought about helping to shift the conversation from the past, but ended up speaking her mind.

“It may be inappropriate when we’re all so busy, but I really am putting a lot of work into this. I can’t help but want to write more. Um, I just type away at the laptop I borrowed. Also, um…”

Unsure how to express the excitement in her heart, she tapped her fingers together.

“Even during class and when preparing for the festival, I end up thinking about the best way to write the next part of the story.”

“I see. So things like killing off a character and immediately bringing them back, taking a trip to a hot spring, or starting with the weakest of the enemies?”

“Th-that’s all kind of cheap.”

“Then none of the characters die, they never go to a hot spring, and the weakest enemy never shows up?”

“And that’s kind of unexciting.”

She thought for a while but looked up when she heard hammering.

Those distant sounds were coming from the school behind them. The other students were finishing the final preparations for the year end festival, but Sayama and Shinjou were not helping.

Shinjou looked to Sayama, but he was as expressionless as ever.

*…In other words, we should focus on what we need to do.*

*I suppose that’s how it’s always been,* she added.

So she lightly adjusted her grip on the binder.

“Anyway.” She looked up at Sayama with a hint of tension in her face. “About the message from Izumo-san when we left the school.”

“Yes.” Sayama nodded. “It seems a bald man showed up, acted on his misplaced bald anger, and baldly lost. …I wonder if the others know.”

●

Gentle music washed over the shelves of products.

The soft lights on the low ceiling illuminated the green, red, and blue lined up on the shelves.

The shelves contained quite a few publications, but the girls and others reaching for those barely made their way to one area.

The shelves there contained cleaning products.

A single girl stood in that nearly deserted area while comparing products with a serious look on her face.

She had short blonde hair and wore a track suit bearing the name “Heo T”. She soon reached out toward the shelves.

“I want a toilet cleaner you can just stick in the tank, but should I get the potage kind or the new chili sauce kind?”

She checked the price, but they were both 197 yen including tax.

She turned her serious expression back and forth between them while crouching down in her bike shorts.

“I bet Harakawa will be surprised when he flushes and all the water turns yellow or red.”

When she had bought the glow-in-the-dark version, Harakawa had forced her out of bed once he got home from work that night.

He had dragged her to the bathroom and asked her to flush the toilet without turning on the lights.

*…I never thought it would be that bright.*

She had only seen it during the day, so it had really surprised her.

She had heard it was meant to help you see where to aim at night, but that version was no longer on the shelves.

She checked the shelf and saw a "Mapo Tofu" and "Return to Your Innocent Days with Milk" versions, so she wondered what kind of water they would make.

With anticipation warming her hart, she saw legs standing next to her. She looked up at the black leather pants.

"Oh, Harakawa. Did you come to get me?"

"I came to stop you from buying anything weird, Heo Thunderson. …Show me what you're holding there."

She groaned, returned the potage and chili sauce ones to the shelf, and placed a harmless melon soda version in the basket.

She stood up, held the basket out to him, and picked up her school sports bag from the floor. She placed the strap over her shoulder and wore it vertically along her back.

"Like you said this morning, we get five hundred yen for dinner tonight. How about a nappa cabbage pot with tofu?"

"Nappa cabbage has gotten expensive. I'll have something a little more-…"

"You said you weren't going to do that."

Heo smiled bitterly.

"Besides, you're putting all the money you make from UCAT towards my high school, but I'm planning to go to a public school."

"Listen, Heo. It's better to keep your options open. If you do end up going to a public school, you can return the money to me then. And if I don't treat you right, there are a lot of people who will harass me about it."

"Really? But if I *can* go to a private school…"

*Could I go to your school?* she thought but did not say.

If she did say it, he might reject the idea, so she left it unsaid.

He also said nothing.

And after a while…

"———"

With the basket in hand, Harakawa wordlessly turned his back

and walked toward the food.

Heo frantically followed him. She almost felt like he was leaving her behind instead of rejecting her, so she rushed after him.

She reached to take the basket from him.

"…"

But she stopped.

She closed her eyes and swallowed the words she almost uttered.

A moment later, she opened her eyes without saying anything and focused on the music coming from the speakers on the ceiling. The music played through a phrase and she walked alongside Harakawa. As it played another phrase, she reached for the opposite handle of the basket.

"We can still spend another two hundred yen. Should we check the meat?"

With that, she grabbed the handle.

He turned his sunglasses toward her and nodded.

Holding the basket together, they made their way to the meat section but found it was crowded because a sale had started.

Heo was unsure what to do, but she heard a sudden sound from her back.

It was her cellphone. She had put it in her bag, but she was unable to immediately remove the bag from her back and she tried to reach the zipper without removing it.

"U-um…huh? Nn, ah. Um!"

"Why are you shaking your butt and dancing around, Heo Thunderson? Are you sick? You are, aren't you? Understood. Stay away from me."

"Th-that's just mean! And more importantly, Harakawa! My phone… U-um, it's in my bag."

He casually reached out and lowered the bag's front zipper.

He reached inside but frowned after about two seconds.

"Squish?"

"…Squish?"

Heo frowned back and saw that he truly was frowning with his hand inside her bag.

"Heo Thunderson, did you have something indescribable in your bag?"

"Eh? No, the only thing in there is the annin tofu from cooking

class today. …Wait, how did it spill out!?”

“What kind of idiot tilts this kind of bag on its side to put it on her back?”

After thinking for about five seconds, she hung her head and raised a hand.

She heard a sigh from above and wondered if he was going to hit her.

“You can have three hundred yen. Make some more.”

Something hard pressed against her forehead.

She looked and saw the cellphone in front of her eyes.

She took it and looked up at Harakawa. He had removed his bandanna to wipe off his hand and he looked exasperated.

“I can use three hundred yen? Are you sure we’ll still be able to afford breakfast tomorrow?”

“Easily. And the people around us are giving me cold stares, so don’t give such specific comments on the finances we need to live.”

“Oh, okay.” She nodded and then pressed the phone to her ear. “Hello. This is Heo Thunderso- Why are you throwing your bandanna into my bag after wiping your hands on it? Oh, sorry. Um, who is it?”

“Oh… Are you having some trouble? This is Kazami, by the way.”

“Hm? What is it? Isn’t it still too early for the meeting tonight?”

“Um, yes,” she said hesitantly. After a while, she continued. “It seems Kaku won his battle with Boldman. I’m about to stop by UCAT’s hospital, so you two head back to school on your own. …And be careful.”

●

On an evening road, Kazami was riding her mountain bike for the first time in a long while.

This had been her primary means of transportation before meeting Izumo. She had felt a little bad when she discovered the dust coating it.

She had originally met him because she was riding around on it at night to distract herself from her daily troubles.

As she recalled that, she controlled the bike with one hand and spoke into her cellphone.

“Kaku only pulled a muscle, so he’s fine. Anyway, I just wanted to

let you know the situation here."

There was a field to the right of the road and houses to the left. Continuing straight led to an intersection, after which houses filled the right side as well.

She heard Harakawa's voice over the phone.

"So the other Gears fell for the Army's attempts to shake them."

*He's a sharp one,* thought Kazami. She decided she did not have to go beyond the main point.

"More like Boldman might show up, so be careful."

There was a short pause that she guessed was him thinking.

"Ooki-sensei's the same as always, though."

"She is." Kazami nodded. "That's because she sees herself as a part of UCAT. Sibyl does too and I'm thankful for it."

"Yeah, but there's a lot to think about here. We need to be on the lookout for other forces."

She was curious about what he meant by 'there's a lot to think about', but she did not get to ask because Heo spoke.

"Um, will Sayama and Shinjou be okay?"

"Those two are never 'okay', so don't worry."

With that, Kazami looked around at the night scenery filled with chilly winter air.

The sky above the field to her right was covered in stars.

Her gaze stopped on one point of that sky and she frowned.

"Either way, all of us and anyone near Team Leviathan and the Concept Cores are in a dangerous position. And the easiest of us to target would probably be Sayama and Shinjou."

She took a breath.

"I wonder what those two are doing now. Also…"

"Also?"

"Yes." Kazami nodded, stopped her mountain bike, and looked into the night sky to her right. "I may have been imagining things, but I could have sworn I saw something odd pass by in the sky. It was a white origami crane."

●

A certain dark hallway was only wide enough for two people to pass each other.

The walls were plaster and it had no windows. The only light was

on the ceiling at the corner far down the corridor.

The wooden floor creaked whenever someone stepped even gently on it.

The light showed three people producing those wooden footsteps.

The one walking softly in the lead was a woman in a kimono.

“This was really a surprise, young master. Not only do you suddenly show up, but you want to open that old room. And with Setsu-chan, too.”

She turned around with smiling eyes behind her glasses and she looked to a boy in a suit and someone in a school uniform a half step behind.

The boy in the suit, Sayama, spoke as he followed the woman.

“I just thought it was about time to see it, Ryouko. And one of the reasons I am able to set foot inside is my life with Shinjou-kun.”

“Is that so?”

Shinjou saw Ryouko face forward again.

The woman’s voice reached her from beyond the kimono.

The words arrived from the darkness and the back ahead.

“Setsu-chan, you found your mother, didn’t you?

The sudden question sent a tremor through Shinjou’s back, but she managed to gulp and answer.

“Yes. …Her name was Shinjou Yukio.”

“Is that so?” Ryouko’s back gave a small nod. “Yeah… I had a feeling it was.”

The woman’s tone of voice prevented Shinjou from saying a word.

“Are you listening, Setsu-chan?”

“Wh-what?”

Shinjou trembled at the sudden question and Ryouko continued on.

“On the west side of Taka-Akita Academy’s schoolyard, there are a bunch of hand sculptures left by some graduates. …Yukio-san’s hand is in there too. Did you know that?”

“N-no, I…didn’t.”

“Is that so?”

Shinjou detected a hint of joy in Ryouko’s voice, so…

“Thank you, Ryouko-san.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’m just making up for the past. Like, for example, why I know about that when I’m not even a graduate of

Taka-Akita. And…”

She took a breath.

“I want to help you out outside of all that.”

She turned around and sent a smile to the other two.

“Let’s go further in. I’ll lead the way. …I happen to know at least a little bit about this.”

As if to show off her smile, Sayama moved to the side of the hallway.

That allowed Shinjou to fully look Ryouko in the eye.

Ryouko stopped walking and lowered her eyebrows a little.

“Listen, Setsu-chan. A long time ago, I was a terrible girl. I got mad that someone was ignoring me, didn’t try to better myself, and didn’t even pursue the person because my pride and embarrassment wouldn’t let me. And as I hid from the others and resented them…”

She paused.

“I lost all of those people.”

Her tone seemed to thrust this confession of the past onto Shinjou.

Shinjou frantically spoke up.

“Th-that wasn’t your fault! It was the Great Kansai Earthquake that-…”

“But I regret it. I regret not showing them the best version of me I could. But even that thought came after the resentment.”

She smiled bitterly.

“I couldn’t help but wonder if Asagi-san, Yume-san, and I could have continued our family-like relationship if Yukio-san had never shown up.”

Shinjou felt a certain meaning in the words Ryouko kept throwing out at her.

The relationships seen in those words indicated a certain fact.

“Um…”

She hesitated and glanced over at Sayama’s back.

“What kind of relationship did my mother have with Sayama-kun’s father and the others?”

She chose her words carefully and tried not to settle on an answer for herself.

Ryouko answered, but not with a bitter smile. It was a true smile with her eyebrows lowered.

"Yukio-san and Asagi-san's hand sculptures are lined up right next to each other. …While Yume-san's is one separated from theirs."

Shinjou saw Sayama move slightly. He brought his right hand to the left side of his chest.

But she also saw Ryouko close her eyes to ignore the action.

Ryouko then raised her eyebrows a little.

"Young master, have some confidence."

She opened her eyes and turned her powerful gaze first to Sayama and then to Shinjou.

"Asagi-san chose Yume-san in the end. That was only after Yukio-san left and sent back word of her own marriage, but you know what? I don't think Asagi-san was the kind of person to choose someone because they were all that was left."

So…

"If I can think that, then you can think it even more, can't you?"

Shinjou did not nod in agreement. This was between Ryouko and Sayama.

She simply watched the smile that softened Ryouko's expression.

Meanwhile, Ryouko shrugged with her eyes closed.

"Don't worry, Setsu-chan. I won't be the Yukio-san between you and the young master. I tried to when he was only a child, but I realized it wouldn't work."

She laughed quietly.

"After all, taking responsibility would be way too much work."

She seemed to be talking to herself, but someone answered.

Shinjou heard Sayama's voice from the wall to her left.

"Ryouko, we are causing you all sorts of trouble, aren't we?"

He moved from the wall and stood in front of Shinjou.

Shinjou saw his right hand hanging by his side.

That was the hand he had been holding to his chest.

She wrapped her hands around the trembling hand. She held it tight to give it strength.

She then faced forward and the two of them looked to Ryouko's slight smile.

"Um, Ryouko-san?"

"Hm? What is it, Setsu-chan? …If you want to know where you can get the surgery to be with the young master, I can get you a reservation right away. Or do you want some anesthetic in the

crotch so we can do it here?”

Ryouko began fishing through her pocket, so Shinjou frantically waved her hands back and forth.

“W-we’ve already dealt with that. I’m fine!”

“Eh?”

Ryouko frowned and Shinjou realized she had misspoken.

It was true that her body as Sadame was functioning ever since her previous trip to Sakai, but…

*…Ryouko-san doesn’t know my body changes like that.*

She hurriedly tried to find something to say, but Ryouko seemed to have found her own meaning in the words. She was even more flustered than Shinjou.

“Eh? Oh, Setsu-chan! How bold! Is that true, young master!? Did Setsu-chan make up his mind on his own!? And with physical proof!?”

“No, Ryouko. Shinjou-kun is trying to say that no surgery is necessary and that bodily modifications are as inelegant as you can get.”

“Eh!? So Setsu-chan made a number of impossibilities possible while still being Setsu-chan!?”

Ryouko was shocked at her own words, but strength quickly filled her expression and she pointed at Shinjou with both hands.

“That’s it!!”

“No, that is not it, Ryouko-san! And Sayama-kun! Don’t say things that will only cause misunderstandings!”

“D-don’t worry, Setsu-chan! This changed my way of thinking by about 1800 degrees!”

“Isn’t that rotating around five times and ending up where you started?”

Ryouko frowned and looked up at the dark ceiling. She counted under her breath for a while.

“I-It doesn’t matter. I’m just bad at math is all!! My best subject was PE!”

*…Well, for one, that’s more arithmetic than math. And for another, that’s more than just being “bad” at it.*

Shinjou kept her comments to herself and spoke only the proper comment aloud.

“You were good at PE?”

“Yes. I was great at ‘line up’, ‘be careful’, and ‘take a break’. And I always wear a kimono, so my posture is excellent.”

Shinjou felt any response she gave would be halfhearted, so she simply tugged on Sayama’s hand.

He seemed to understand the situation.

“Ryouko, show us to the room.”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I forgot to control myself after getting into a serious discussion.”

Ryouko quickly faced forward and began walking.

She looked somehow light as she turned the corner and Shinjou breathed a sigh of relief.

The woman’s voice then filled the narrow corridor.

“It must be the season for that kind of thing because Kouji’s started taking an interest in the opposite sex.”

“Kouji has?”

Sayama sounded surprised and Shinjou agreed with him.

When Ryouko answered, there was a carefree note to her voice.

“He has. Lately, he took in this girl with a hurt leg. He’s keeping her here because he says he doesn’t know how to contact her family…but that’s a crime.”

“Ry-Ryouko-san, you shouldn’t treat your family like criminals.”

“But she’s fourteen years younger than him. I think that’s wrong.”

Meanwhile, they arrived at the far end of the hallway.

They stood in front of a room on the far edge of the house.

The wooden sliding door filled the entire end of the hallway and Ryouko pulled out a ring of keys.

She faced Sayama with her smile gone.

“Do you reallllllllly want to see past this door, young master and Setsu-chan?”

“What answer will make you show us?”

Ryouko smiled without answering.

She did not move and that filled Shinjou with anxious doubt.

*…Is she not going to let us see?*

She looked up at Sayama, but he was looking at Ryouko who remained motionless.

Suddenly, he closed his eyes and opened his lips.

“Shinjou-kun.”

She trembled a bit at hearing her name so suddenly.

Before she could ask what he wanted, he continued.

"Listen. This is a job for you."

●

"Eh?"

She answered him with a question and slowly looked at Ryouko.

*…Why is this a job for me?*

Ryouko's only answer was to turn her smile toward Shinjou.

*Why?* wondered Shinjou. *Why is this my job?*

She quickly found her answer.

*…I don't know.*

That was obvious. This was her first time back here.

But that truth led her to the answer.

"It can't be."

She looked up in surprise and looked directly at Ryouko's smile.

"Open the door and show us, Ryouko-san. I have already had Sayama-kun give his permission."

"You had him give it? …Setsu-chan, you make it sound like you're above him…like you're the master of this house."

Ryouko gave an exaggerated look of surprise and Shinjou nodded.

"I don't like saying things like this and I will only do so because I believe you're testing me, Ryouko-san."

Her words and her strong tone changed Ryouko's expression.

The woman smiled. And unlike before, this was a relieved smile.

And so Shinjou spoke further with their implicit understanding.

"The one who inherits the name Shinjou has arrived. …Yes, this may be why you backed off when it came to my mother. After all, the Tamiya family would not exist without Shinjou Kaname."

She took a breath.

"Open the door, Ryouko-san. The head of the Tamiya family sealed away this part of the past out of consideration, but the head of the Sayama household wishes to see it despite the pain and the head of the Shinjou family wants it released."

Shinjou smiled.

"Thank you for showing such care to the name Shinjou for so long."

Ryouko's smile grew with satisfaction.

"We have only done what anyone would do."

With those words, Ryouko closed her eyes.

She swept the sleeves of her kimono to either side, gently shaking the air in the process. She then crouched down and sat with her legs below her.

She corrected her posture in front of the door.

"The previous generation of the Shinjou family did not know the Tamiya family's history. Although Master Sayama apparently told her later, after she had gone somewhere else. Therefore…"

She placed her hands on the ground and gave a deep bow.

"I am the first of the Tamiya family to officially face a member of the Shinjou family since the previous generation and the one before that."

She let out a breath and raised her head.

She turned her powerful gaze toward Shinjou.

But Shinjou looked back as if to push her gaze away and as if to respond to Ryouko's attitude.

Ryouko nodded just once as if to say that was good enough.

She then corrected the collar of her kimono and spoke.

"Please ask of me whatever you would like, head of the Shinjou family."

She then turned to Sayama.

"Young master, your mother worked for IAI, but she never told me her exact position there. However…she was always quick to return home and she did tell me one thing."

"What was that?"

"There was apparently a place known as a 'study' at her workplace."

Shinjou saw Sayama frown at the word "study".

A month and a half ago, he had visited the Kinugasa residence and seen the man's underground study.

*…Is there something like that somewhere else?*

However, the answer was not going to present itself here, so she simply nodded and looked to Ryouko.

Ryouko nodded back and smiled.

"Now, then. That is more or less my side of things. I hope we can continue to get along in the future."

# Chapter 3

## “Clashing Appearance”

Say, “So you’re here”
Reply, “Indeed I am”

●

A three meter wide concrete corridor led to a metal door. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling were a bright white and they reflected off the gray floor.

A leather-covered bench sat against the wall and three people sat on it while keeping as much distance between each other as possible.

The one furthest down was a woman with gray hair.

“This will probably be a lot of trouble, Roger. How about you take control of the room past that door in the name of American UCAT’s love, freedom, and prejudiced dignity?”

Those words were directed at the man in a suit sitting in the center of the bench.

“Diana, we in the States have a word called tolerance. Not that I expect the people who hunted the Romans in the great Germanic invasion to understand. …Isn’t that right, UCAT Director Ooshiro?”

His question was directed at the old man in a lab coat sitting on the other end of the bench.

But he did not turn around and he had a red-haired maid standing by his side.

Roger tilted his head and pushed up his glasses as he looked to Ooshiro’s hanging head.

However, Ooshiro remained as motionless as a boxer who was concentrating after finishing his calculations.

Roger tilted his head further.

“UCAT Director Ooshiro? We are here in the Yokosuka American UCAT branch to hear what the other UCATs have to say and you are the center of attention.”

Wondering if the old man was asleep, Roger frowned, but Diana whispered to him.

“His ear.”

He pushed up his glasses and checked there.

“Ah, th-there’s sand in his ear! UCAT Director Ooshiro! That is my dream sand! How did you manage to steal it!? And all to give yourself some selfish dream!”

He grabbed Ooshiro’s collar from the side and shook him, but the old man did not respond.

After a while, he spoke in his sleep with a happy look on his face.

"Ee hee hee."

"What do you mean 'ee hee hee'!?"

But the only one to react to Roger's shout was the red-haired maid standing next to Ooshiro.

She looked into the old man's ear.

"Ooshiro-sama, you have some trash in your ear."

She pulled an industrial vacuum cleaner nozzle from below her apron, pressed it against Ooshiro's ear, and switched it on.

A great sound shook the corridor and Ooshiro twitched from the suction.

"A-ahh!! #8-kun! Y-you're going to suck it out! You're going to suck my brains right out!!"

"Testament. I am simply cleaning out your ear. Your brain will remain right where it is."

"Am I not allowed to describe how it feels!? I think you've been too harsh lately, #8-kun!"

She thought for precisely one second and switched off the vacuum's battery power.

"I have determined you are imagining things, Ooshiro-sama. You may have a persecution complex. And unfortunately for you, things are only considered fact once someone else acknowledges them."

"Then there's nothing I can do when I'm surrounded by enemies!!"

She naturally ignored him and turned to Roger.

"Roger-sama, Ooshiro-sama has woken up."

"Testament."

Roger nodded and faced Ooshiro.

Ooshiro bent over and peered up at Roger.

"Oh? You were here, Roger-kun?"

Ooshiro tilted his head to either side to dump out the sand.

"Sorry about that. I was bored, so I borrowed some of your sand. …Hm? What is it, Roger-kun? Do you want your sand back? Then place your hands on my ears. You'll be able to hear the ocean."

#8 did exactly that. She slammed her palms against either side of his head from behind.

A solid noise rang out before Ooshiro swayed and leaned against the wall.

“I can… I can see the ocean…”

“It does not really matter, but why are you so strong-willed when it comes to me, UCAT Director Ooshiro?”

“It’s not just you! I’m a UCAT Director, so I have to strong-willed about everything!”

Roger answered the old man by gesturing toward #8.

Seeing his hand, Ooshiro looked to #8 and gave an expressionless shriek.

“I-I’m the UCAT Director! I-I’m #8-kun’s boss!”

“What does that matter, Ooshiro-sama?”

He thought on her words for about three seconds.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing, Ooshiro-sama? It makes no logical sense to me.”

“Oh, well, um, you see…”

“I asked why you apologized. Quit hemming and hawing and answer my question.”

“Wow, am I being scolded for doing nothing more than apologizing!?”

Someone then stopped Ooshiro’s question and #8’s frown.

It was a clap from Diana on the other end of the bench.

“Everyone, I believe it is about time.”

They turned around and saw Diana’s smiling eyes looking to the metal door.

They then heard a sound.

Muttering voices and tremoring noise came from beyond the door.

“The various UCAT representatives are beginning to enter the meeting room. And they are here to accuse us.”

The noise beyond the door grew louder.

“—————”

Music played. The entrance music was a hard rock march and commentary accompanied it.

“Now, then! The world’s UCAT representatives are arriving to the underground meeting room in Yokosuka UCAT! This accusation match has no time limit and their opponents are the formidable Japanese, American, and German UCATs! Who will be the first to make their stand against them!?”

The people cheered.

“Oh, here we go! We have our first one! This human insincerity dismisses all testimony with a single careless statement! Covered in the Mediterranean wind, it’s the ever-sloppy Italian UCAT!”

Applause, cheers, and cries of “Italy” came from the meeting room.

“Now, the next one is here! They completed the foundation of litigation and ramen four thousand years ago! Has the punishment system of this Legalist nation truly achieved perfection!? It’s Chinese UCAT!!”

A roaring cheer followed.

“The third is a surprising individual! The one and only god is always watching! Even in the bath or on the toilet! So one must always be prepared! This oil producing nation is perfectly prepared on the physical front as well! Let’s hear it for Saudi UCAT!!”

Surprised voices spread and even more contestants’ entrances could be heard from the corridor.

As the cheers and other sounds shook them, Diana smiled and shrugged.

“You know why we are standing before them, don’t you?”

Roger shrugged as well.

“I suppose I will answer with testament. We bear the responsibility for American UCAT and German UCAT never revealing what Japanese UCAT was hiding and for fighting the other Gears as allies. But setting that aside, I think UCAT Director Ooshiro should apologize. Apologize to the world.”

“Th-that’s just mean, Roger-kun! I’m always facing the entire world. And with a full prostration!”

The two men’s exchange filled Diana’s smile with bitterness.

“Neither of you are giving any thought to apologizing, are you?”

After a pause, both of the men formed bitter smiles of their own.

“Well, you see, Diana-kun.” Ooshiro loosened his necktie. “It seems Boldman has already fought Izumo-kun as 6th’s representative. …Doesn’t that make it seem buying time here will actually be useful?”

“Testament,” she answered. “Then how about we make them wait a while longer before going in?”

Roger nodded in agreement

More cheers came from beyond the metal door, but he crossed his legs as a show of defiance.

“Well, I won’t argue if they insist on making this an accusation convention and refuse to have an actual conversation.”

He shook his wrist to produce a small test tube from his sleeve.

He gently shook the blue sand in the test tube.

“I had been looking for a chance to test sleeping with my eyes open.”

●

At night, the streetlights advertised their position with their own light.

Those streetlights followed a narrow road.

The lights gave a dim view of the surrounding houses.

At this time, the people were hiding in the houses and few of them were out on the road. Cars could be heard on a distant main road, but that was beyond a wall of darkness.

This was a one-lane road and the white lines running along either side were narrow.

However, two forms could be seen below the streetlights.

One was a slender person and the other was a small animal.

The person was a girl in black. She wore a cloak and a three-cornered hat. Her right hand held a broom with a flower-print cover and her left hand held a single white origami crane.

The small animal was a black cat following at her feet.

The cat looked up at her as she came to a stop below one streetlight.

“Brunhild, are you really going to attack now that you’ve left?”

“Yes? Is that a problem? Besides, it seems Diana and the others have already noticed.”

Brunhild put the paper crane in her pocket and turned her sharp gaze forward.

A long fence continued to her right and a wooden gate was located halfway down.

“The Tamiya house. Sayama and Shinjou are here at the moment. And with no equipment. I can’t touch them while they’re inside, but it should only take a single attack once they leave.”

She raised her broom like a spear.

“If we had known about Top-Gear during 1st-Gear’s Leviathan Road, what would Venerable Hagen have done? I bet Fafner wouldn’t have shut up about it.”

“From that, I take it you don’t have permission for this attack.”

Exasperation filled the cat’s voice.

“You don’t, do you? You want to attack before the others on the reservation can. That way you can settle things with UCAT in your own way.”

“Cats these days really like to speculate with no proof, don’t they? I just haven’t forgotten my grudge, that’s all.”

“Well, I haven’t forgotten either, so let’s do this together, Brunhild. Let’s wait until Sayama and Shinjou leave.”

The cat sat down on the road and Brunhild turned to face the gate.

After about three seconds, the cat suddenly looked up at her.

“Still nothing?”

“Just how impatient are you?”

“I’m a cat. Sitting still isn’t easy for me. I can’t help it.”

The cat sighed, lay down, curled up, stretched out, sat and scratched his head with his back leg, licked and rubbed his face and stomach to wash himself, and even chased his tail for fun.

“Brunhild, why are you pointing your broom at me?”

“Have you ever heard of tension?”

“I-I have! Of course I have. That’s just rude, Brunhild.”

“Then tell me what it means. If you don’t, I’ll hit you.”

Sweat poured from the cat’s entire body.

“Um,” he began. “Well,” he continued. “Does it have a flavor?”

“Yes, it sometimes tastes like a mixture of iron and salt. As a color, I suppose it would be red.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Don’t worry. There isn’t any pain. Yet.”

“Are you talking about something else now?”

“I am.” She nodded. “I’m talking about you!!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!! Ah, no! The scar from before is still sensitive, so don’t attack me ther- hee hee hee hee hee hyo hyo hyo hyo!”

After she attacked the cat for a while, his sides trembled in laughter, so Brunhild released him.

“Now, then.”

She stood up, but…

“——————”

She quickly turned around.

She looked five meters ahead where another streetlight shined down.

The white light washed over a human form.

“Light?”

She saw a white light.

This soft light was even brighter than the streetlight.

It had instantly descended from the sky, it took the form of two wings, and it had a single girl at its base.

The girl wore a white armored uniform and a scarf, she carried a long pallet on her back, and she held a large white spear.

“Kazami!”

“What do you want, cosplay girl?”

Kazami landed in front of Brunhild and faced her.

“Now,” said Kazami with her eyebrows a bit raised. “I see 1st wants their turn after 6th.”

●

Kazami faced the witch.

She placed her feet at shoulder width and smiled with her eyebrows still raised.

“I will be your opponent.”

She faced forward where Brunhild stood in the darkness.

The girl wore her black combat cloak and three-cornered hat and she held a broom.

She was prepared to fight.

But the same could be said of Kazami.

“I never thought I would end up doing this with you.”

*…I’d prefer to say we shouldn’t fight if we aren’t enemies.*

She understood that, but she also understood their respective positions. She knew that Brunhild was here as 1st-Gear’s representative.

So she held G-Sp2 under her right arm and reached for the long pallet on her back.

“I’ll lend you this before we begin. If you’re picking a fight with

Team Leviathan to clear 1st-Gear's grudge, it would be best if you had this, wouldn't it?"

The long white pallet smashed the asphalt as it stabbed into the ground.

Brunhild frowned when she saw it, but her eyebrows soon twisted and shot up.

"You don't mean…!"

●

A certain white corridor had no windows. The white fluorescent lights illuminated the black letters saying BF3 on the walls, but BF4 and BF2 were lined up alongside it.

The people walking down the corridor wore white cloaks, armored uniforms, or work outfits. They walked one way or the other, carried luggage, transported materials, or exchanged words or diagrams.

A boy stood by the wall in order to avoid all that movement. He wore the pants of an armored uniform and a T-shirt. The nametag on his chest said Hiba Ryuuji.

The people moving up or down the corridor looked at him, saw the nametag, saw where he was standing, and gave a nod of understanding at the fact that he was standing there instead of helping.

He could only nod back with a bitter smile at the fact that he was not helping.

"I'll help some later."

He muttered that comment in front of the medical room.

He listened to the footsteps and voices of the passing people, but he did not move from that spot.

"I'm not trying to skip out on work or anything."

He kept his bitter smile, but the flow of surrounding people vanished.

He crossed his arms and noted that Japanese UCAT was very busy despite the truth revealed by the Army.

*…Well, I guess they can't just abandon their work. The time limit on the negative concept activation is only five days away.*

A month and a half ago, the Army's attack had destroyed the third floor and up of the UCAT building.

As a precaution against secondary damages, the aboveground portion was being completely remade. The oil painting and other things in the intact first floor hall had all been transferred to Taka-Akita Academy or other facilities.

While the aboveground portion was being rebuilt, the underground was being used instead.

To make the modifications and restoration of the underground easier, each floor had been broken apart by room and reconnected with concept spaces. It was common to find first basement facilities on the fifth basement or three storage areas connected together to form a workplace.

Everyone was busy with the restoration work.

Hiba had heard that the foreign UCATs had planned to take over Japanese UCAT after the Army's attack was settled.

*…By taking over the group that had hidden the truth, they could demonstrate their sincerity to the Gear reservations.*

He felt they had had a decent excuse for an occupation. After Japanese UCAT had cleared the greatest barrier that was the Army, they would have had all of their authority stripped from them.

But the different countries had failed to work together well and American UCAT had stationed itself to protect Japanese UCAT, so the other UCATs had missed their timing.

He had also heard that German UCAT had held the other powerful European UCATs in check.

While the foreign UCATs had hesitated, Japanese UCAT had organized its personnel and announced it would hold a meeting for all UCATs.

That had led to those other UCATs gathering together to accuse the American, German, and Japanese UCATs of conspiring together.

Ooshiro's group had apparently gone to an underground meeting room in Yokosuka, but Hiba was unsure how well that would turn out.

*…I hope he isn't doing anything too weird.*

"Well, #8 is with him, so it should be fine."

Of the automatons, the ones in Japanese UCAT and the Kanda Laboratory had stuck with Low-Gear.

He had heard the ones in Izumo UCAT were not leaving the underground area there. They were holed up in the underground

laboratory and Miyako was acting as their representative.

*Is something going to happen there?* wondered Hiba.

A report had just come in that Izumo had fought Boldman and been sent to the hospital.

With the situation in flux, they would never be able to settle everything in the meeting room below Yokosuka.

And that state of flux was controlled by the Concept Cores and those fighting over them.

*…That would be us.*

He thought about it casually, but he did feel a sense of responsibility.

If the enemy brought out anything in the god of war class, it was his duty to stand in their way and accept the challenge.

Currently, their enemies were those who wanted the Concept Cores.

If there was anything for him, it would likely be from 3rd-Gear.

He had no idea what would be coming, but it would happen eventually as long as they held the Concept Cores.

"…"

*…I don't like this at all.*

He had fought alongside Gyes in the battle against Black Sun. He knew Gyes had been perfectly courteous to Mikage and kind to the others.

Gyes had seemed to find exchanges with #8 and Sibyl especially meaningful, so she had often talked about Low-Gear with them and asked how things had been since they had come to this world.

Hiba had also crossed blades with her in training. She rode on her god of war's shoulder, so…

*…I had a great view of her underwear.*

*With that tight skirt, it was unavoidable,* he thought as he closed his eyes and nodded to convince himself.

A moment later…

"What is it, Ryuuji-kun?"

Mikage's voice suddenly reached him from the side.

He quickly looked up and saw the medical room's door had opened.

Chao had once worked there, but it was now run by a female doctor who had worked under Chao.

Hiba briefly recalled that, but…

"How did it go, Mikage-san?"

He looked to his side where Mikage held an examination report.

She wore a white armored uniform and her skirt fluttered as she bent forward.

"Nn."

She narrowed her eyes and her eyelashes bent in a smile.

But she only said "nn" again and nothing more.

*…Did something make her happy?*

She could now walk without a cane or someone pulling on her hand. It was awkward and she could not break into a full run, but it was enough for everyday life.

Everyone around her was looking after her and she was apparently secretly learning to cook.

She was saying "nn" a lot recently.

It was a sign she was in a good mood, so…

"That's good."

"Nn." She nodded. "Let's take a bath today."

Hiba's mind leapt from his head at that sudden comment.

*…Eh?*

The word "wait" bounced around his brain. The words "don't wait" were bouncing around too. "Which is it" joined in, followed by "well, it doesn't matter", and "are you sure it doesn't matter".

"…"

He calmed his breathing and looked around.

Without even focusing, he could tell the people had stopped walking and moving about.

He also felt some odd gazes on the back of his neck. They were filled with what one could call murderous intent.

*…This isn't good.*

The label on the wall said BF2, but this was actually at BF4's depth.

If he tried to reach the surface now, he was certain the elevator would "malfunction".

*…This is really bad.*

"I have a lot to show you in the bath."

The level of "bad" rose to about thirty percent.

Sweat covered his back in an instant and he just barely managed

to maintain his casual expression.

Mikage was giving a carefree smile next to him, but all sound and motion had vanished from their surroundings.

He had to choose between his safety and Mikage's good mood. The answer was obvious.

*…I'll bet on Mikage-san and only on Mikage-san! I'll bet it all on her!!*

So he gathered all of his courage and asked her a question.

"Ha…ha ha. What has you wanting to take a bath all of a sudden?"

"Nn. You don't like that we haven't taken one together in a while, do you? You want to see, don't you?"

The level of "bad" grew to fifty percent and Hiba's sweating grew just as much.

He heard whispering voices around him.

"Boss, should we take him out?"

"No, it's too soon. It's still too soon. We need to wait until he's alone."

"Yeah, I can't believe he's standing there waiting for his bath time instead of helping us."

As the effect of synergy heated up the surrounding area, Hiba felt his blood cool and he looked to the end of the corridor. He looked to the nearly deserted stairs.

"U-um, Mikage-san? H-how about we go outside?"

"Nn."

Something soft suddenly bound him from behind.

Mikage had embraced him.

The touch and heat of her body reached him through the back of his T-shirt and he sensed danger.

He was acting as her shield, so his front was wide open. He saw a group sitting and holding sniper rifles over by the stairs at the end of the corridor. They were entirely focused on maintaining those guns.

"M-Mikage-san? This makes it a little…a little hard to walk."

"Nn. But you haven't been touching me lately."

It rose to seventy percent and Mikage supplied a finishing blow.

"Hm? You're sweating, Ryuuji-kun."

It broke past one hundred percent and a special division

commander spoke to the snipers at the end of the corridor.

"Okay, time for some target practice."

"W-wait a minute!!" shouted Hiba.

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind. It was a female voice and it was asking a question.

"Is something the matter, Mikage-sama?"

Before Hiba could realize it was Sibyl's voice, Mikage had lifted her head behind him.

"Nn."

She spoke and removed herself from him.

He turned around with her and saw who had just climbed the stairs at the opposite end of the corridor.

"Sibyl-san, why are you in such a hurry?"

"Just making some preparations. …Were you here for an examination?"

"Nn."

Mikage nodded and handed the examination report to Sibyl who had stopped in front of them.

Sibyl nodded and took it.

"I will look over it later. Anyway, Chisato-sama just called to say she wanted us to send out G-Sp2 and X-Wi. I also checked and found a 1st-Gear concept has been released within Akigawa, so I just finished preparing for that."

"Eh? In other words, Kazami-san is going to solve this with violence against 1st-Gear?"

"Hiba-sama, it is not violence. It is a spontaneous physical solution."

Sibyl smiled and fell silent as if waiting for a sign of comprehension, so Hiba frantically spoke up.

"O-oh. Ha ha ha. Th-that's right! Spontaneity sure is great! Maybe I should go perform some spontaneous observations!"

"That is called peeping and I will report you for it. Testament?"

He averted his gaze and hung his head, but Mikage tilted her head and looked to Sibyl.

Her eyebrows were laid flat and her expression looked blank.

"Is Kazami going to cry again?"

"Not to worry, Mikage-sama. She said she will be fine. That is why I have only made the preparations. I have determined that

should be enough.”

Sibyl took a breath.

“And she wanted to see what 1st-Gear could do when they were serious, so I sent something else along with G-Sp2 and X-Wi.”

A dignified tone filled Sibyl’s voice.

“I also sent the weapon that can be called 1st-Gear itself.”

●

After Kazami stabbed it into the asphalt, the white pallet split in two.

What appeared from the pallet as it broke into a front and back half?

Brunhild was the one to provide the answer.

“Gram!!”

The long metal sword responded to her voice by sending red light through the mold of its details.

Gram produced a voice.

“It has been a while, young lady.”

Brunhild watched on in surprise as Kazami grabbed Gram’s hilt and lifted it.

“This thing’s light,” muttered the girl before throwing it to Brunhild. “This is the power that 1st-Gear wanted. I’m lending it to you. What do you think?”

That question was answered by a dry sound.

It was the sound of Brunhild’s glove catching the airborne sword.

The sword was taller than she was, but the black magician easily swung it around with only her wrist.

“You’re going to regret this. I lived right alongside the one who created Gram, so I know how to use it quite well.”

“Is that so? Well, I know how to use G-Sp2 quite well.”

“Oh?”

Brunhild nodded and lowered her head with the broom in her left hand and the sword in her right.

“You have my thanks. Now that I have Gram, I will represent 1st-Gear in this battle.”

With those words, she tossed the broom into the sky.

It cut through the air overhead and she raised her left hand. She held a piece of metal in that hand.

The metal instantly shattered and dispersed.

It sounded like the ringing of a bell.

*…That was…*

Kazami remembered it. When fighting 1st-Gear's City faction, they had activated concepts like that.

"You're using a concept space as a battlefield, aren't you?"

"Yes. But if that's enough to surprise you, you're going to get hurt."

The lips visible below the three-cornered hat formed a thin smile.

A moment later, Kazami heard a voice.

- **—Writing holds power.**

The concept text spread through the air like a shout and the world changed accordingly.

# Chapter 4

## “Persuasion Through Attack”

Your speed brings the flight meter to its limit
Your bullets are unpolished but powerful
Gallant girl, please show up right away

●

A wide area was filled with voices.

It was a circular underground room with no windows. American UCAT's flag hung from the high cement ceiling and several rows of chairs filled the space below.

This was an underground meeting room.

A white man in a lab coat sat on the east side of the central round table and voices reached him from all the other seats.

Some were protests, some were questions, and some were soothing words meant to persuade him.

The flood of words reverberated through the room, but the old man said nothing. He seemed to think silence was the way to gain the upper hand here.

But the chain-reaction of countless emotions would not stop.

If someone took a break, someone else would accelerate. If someone suggested bringing it to an end, someone else would begin anew.

They were all speaking about what Hajji had said during the Army's attack three weeks before.

Top-Gear had existed.

It had been destroyed.

That had been covered up.

How would he take responsibility for the reactions that were sure to come from the other Gears?

It was nothing but criticism and it showed no sign of slowing.

A small voice joined the sea of voices.

It belonged to the red-haired maid standing next to the old man.

Instead of looking at him, she continued facing forward and did not move her lips.

"Ooshiro-sama, I believe it is about time for dinner. …Can you answer me?"

After a pause, Ooshiro replied without moving his lips either.

"You can speak, #8-kun?"

"Testament. Is that ventriloquism, Ooshiro-sama? I have determined that is indeed better than blatantly speaking with me and looking like you are ignoring them. …Even if this is a bit disturbing."

“If only I could use your shared memory. This would be so much easier.”

She tested the idea with the others and the answer came back in a matter of nanoseconds.

“Ooshiro-sama, fifty-two of us said ‘no’.”

“Oh? Then the other seventy-odd ones said ‘OK’? Is my popularity soaring?”

“Testament. Thirty-one said ‘that sounds disgusting’, twenty said ‘I would rather die’, twelve said ‘I don’t want to think about it’, seven said ‘tell him it’s fine even though we don’t mean it’, and a few said ‘no decision is necessary’ and ‘Ha ha ha. Quit joking and go die’. I have determined your popularity is indeed higher than before.”

“How!? How is that any higher!?”

“Well, probably in the…um…way they expressed it.”

“You shouldn’t have to think that hard to answer it!!”

She obeyed his instructions by no longer thinking about it.

She looked around but was more interested in the sounds than the sights.

She heard angry shouts and voices of protest.

The collection of sound shook the air.

The pressure of the voices gave them no chance to respond.

She saw Diana and Roger silently sitting in the neighboring seats and facing the surrounding people.

Thanks to Siegfried, German UCAT had been close to Japanese UCAT ever since the National Defense Department days.

That was why Diana had been sent as the German UCAT inspector for the Leviathan Road, but the other European powers had been unable to send their own inspectors to hold her in check.

Similarly, the postwar relationship between the United States and Japan had placed American UCAT close to Japanese UCAT. And ever since the battle with 5th-Gear, they had an American UCAT inspector through Heo.

The other powerful nations feared the United States would take control of the Leviathan Road.

But even if they had sent inspectors, Germany and the States had overlooked the past hidden beyond the Leviathan Road.

Diana and Roger had both been involved in the destruction of

Top-Gear.

That made this the other countries' chance to attack. They could remove the German and American UCATs from the negotiating table and seal Japanese UCAT's power while forcing responsibility onto them.

*…They also intend to intervene with the Gear reservations and make the Leviathan Road their own.*

#8 thought to herself while having her auditory devices shut out the jeers.

*…They only see the Leviathan Road and what we were doing as something to increase their own power.*

The power of concepts could easily change the world.

That was why the Gears had fought.

If the Leviathan Road would release all of those concepts, they likely intended to end the Leviathan Road and "manage" the concepts themselves.

If they became that manager, even a small country could possibly gain the same influence as a powerful country.

So…

"Do they think the best option is to speak out now so they can become that manager?"

"This would is a troublesome thing, isn't it?" commented Ooshiro.

She nodded and said more.

"Is the world simply full of rioters if it isn't united?"

"Perhaps."

Ooshiro spun his mechanical pencil with his thumb and #8 turned to the side.

She saw Diana and Roger there, but…

"?"

Despite Diana's calm look, she was folding paper below the desk. Roger was nodding at what the crowd said, but he had made earplugs out of sand.

Seeing them gave #8 a certain thought.

*…Or is all this the direct result of their lack of unity?*

She turned back to Ooshiro.

"Ooshiro-sama, please stop drawing manga while pretending to be taking notes on what they say. Besides, is that really the proper way to use screentone? I have determined you should place it all the

way to the edge."

"Calm down," he said. "Everyone is being so loud. Why do you think that is?"

"Because of this meeting. Attempting to show we are being fair is fine and all, but this has revealed a weakness in the meeting system. However, having individual meetings with each country would take too much time and any closed-room discussions would result in complaints of unfairness from the other countries."

"I see," said Ooshiro. "Then who is the main player out of those who called for this meeting?"

"Well…"

#8 thought for a moment.

"I have determined it is Chinese UCAT."

She looked to a single point in the shouting group.

No one sat in the seat for Chinese UCAT's representative, but…

"I have determined the only nations large enough to have called for this meeting are China, Russia, and France. But Russia and France unfortunately have no corresponding Gear according to the Divine States-World Interaction Theory. Both 1st and 10th are more closely related to Germany, so Russia would not have much influence."

And…

"With Chao-sama's death, China became a normal country with no inspector here. In fact, they can even claim to be a victim for losing their inspector during the Leviathan Road. Thus, China has the chance to take the lead here."

"Then," began Ooshiro. "We're in trouble."

"So it seems," agreed #8. "But that is your job. And this is also an opportunity for us."

"An opportunity?"

"Testament."

She saw Ooshiro give his manga the title "Short-Tempered Iron Woman #8-kun", so she took the Kent paper and began tearing it to pieces.

"I have determined this is an opportunity. We can show the foreign UCATs just how futile their shouts are, so let us buy some time."

The crowd grew a little quieter and looked confused, but #8

continued tearing the paper into pieces no bigger than a few millimeters and scattered it around. She used her gravitational control to send it high into the air so it scattered like snow.

"I have determined it is worth trying. We can show them the strength of the ones currently fighting, regardless of what happened in the past. After all…"

She looked back at all the eyes focused on her.

"No matter how much these people shout that this is nothing but lies, that team's power will not become a lie."

●

The empty city still contained some slight movement.

There was no one on the roads or in the buildings.

All of the cars on the roads were empty, but they coasted along on inertia.

Their speed dropped and they either collided with each other or ran onto the curb.

As everything came to a stop, there was still light and sound.

The bright but empty stores were filled with the roar of machines or the music from CD players. A children's prize machine near a supermarket made an electronic tone.

Suddenly, a new sound was added.

It came from Itsukaichi Road which cut east to west through Akigawa.

On the eastern end of the road, it travelled around the outer edge of a school and two sounds played in competition as they rushed down that two-lane road.

The two sounds were those of something tearing through the air.

They travelled west below the streetlights.

Both of them took the form of flight.

But that was not all.

The sounds contained the color of destruction.

They were also filled with high speed aerial collisions.

Metal clashed with metal and something loudly broke.

The sounds came from two girls.

One of them swiftly flew at low-altitude while standing on a broom.

The other stood on a long, narrow shield like a skateboard and let

her spear's accelerator pull her along like she was waterskiing.

They were Brunhild and Kazami.

The former wielded a long sword and the latter wielded a spear with a scarf wrapped around the tip and the word "cowling" written on that scarf. They were in the middle of a high-speed pursuit.

Kazami had removed her right glove. The blood flowing form her index finger had written the word on her scarf and the words "slides well" on the shield.

They exchanged attacks and projectiles while racing westward along the road.

Currently, the repeated attacks were flying toward Brunhild.

She evaded Kazami's shots and pursued as her opponent accelerated away.

"Honestly …Just lose already!"

Meanwhile, she controlled her broom like a snowboard and swung around the sword that was as tall as she was.

Gram had a single word written on it in magic marker: machinegun.

●

Brunhild looked at the word she had written.

*…That turned out well.*

*The handwriting is nice. Maybe I could have become head of the calligraphy club as well. I could have had the other club members writing day in and day out while teaching them in the 1st-Gear way. That would have been amazing!!*

The black cat on the back of her neck spoke up.

"Brunhild, are you having evil thoughts?"

"What are you talking about? I'm thinking about club activities and culture. …And how to use people."

When she held Gram under her arm and at her waist, Kazami opened her eyes wide.

"Hey, wait! Don't point a gun at people!!"

"You've been aiming a cannon at me this whole time!"

"Oh, c'mon, Brunhild. What are you talking about?"

Kazami held G-Sp2 in her right hand and waved her left hand dismissively.

"This isn't a cannon. It's G-Sp2."

“That’s right,” added G-Sp2.

It was such an awful excuse that Brunhild could not help but fire.

Bullets of light flew from Gram’s tip.

The gunpowder of light produced a repeating staccato.

She slipped between the drifting cars and avoided her enemy’s attacks while firing toward Kazami.

Kazami cried out and accelerated forward.

But Brunhild held Gram in place as it shook from the recoil.

“Honestly. Could this be any more annoying!?”

The repeated sounds of gunfire created the background music for her shout.

“Night after night, people come to my house or Fasolt’s place! We’re not some kind of refuge! And the Requiem Sense isn’t a phone to call the underworld! …Fasolt constantly has to hang from the cliff out back to reflect on what he’s done!”

“It’s not like I know anything about your bizarre customs!”

“Then learn now!”

She added “heavy” in front of “machinegun” to increase the firepower.

What sounded like a signal gun pierced through the sky.

But Kazami soared before Brunhild could swing Gram around.

The girl was fast.

Brunhild’s accelerating broom and attacking sword were separate, but Kazami used G-Sp2’s second form for acceleration and its third form for attack.

For Kazami, firing meant slowing, so her movements tended to be a little slower. On the other hand, she was absurdly fast when focused solely on acceleration.

The bottom of her shield sent sparks flying as she weaved between the drifting cars.

Gram’s pursuing shots of light grazed the ground and tore into the cars.

“!”

A shot to the engine of one car ignited the fuel and blew it up along with several other cars.

Three muffled explosions sounded.

The force blew off the hood and the body instantly sank down.

But a moment later, the reaction to the explosion blew straight

down and sent the cars flying into the air.

The cars acted as torches and scattered shimmering heat.

Brunhild ducked down to slip below them.

Kazami was already moving on ahead.

Brunhild tried to target her back, but a new car appeared between them.

“Oh, honestly! Even when I blow everything out of the way, I can’t get a clear shot!!”

“I think your options are a getting little violent there, Brunhild.”

“Yes, I agree. …It pisses me off to have someone point it out, though.”

*I’ll get her back for this,* she promised herself.

At any rate, speed was what mattered now.

Itsukaichi Road was reaching the intersection in front of the municipal office.

After moving west of the office, a bike lane was added to widen the road.

That made it easier to avoid the cars and expanded the battlefield, so Brunhild increased her broom’s speed to reach that widened battlefield.

“That’s where the real fight begins!!”

Ahead, she saw cars stopped in the intersection.

The empty cars had collided again and again, creating a confused mess.

She did not care. She wrote “acceleration” on the black cat and threw him onto the front of the broom.

He frantically clung to the broom.

“Is this what you call pet abuse!?”

“What are you talking about? You’re not a pet. You’re a family member. …But only for the moment.”

“Th-then this is household bullying!”

As she accelerated, Kazami also picked up more speed and looked back.

“Well, I’m glad to see things are lively back there.”

Kazami raised her eyebrows a smiled bitterly.

“But fine. Let’s settle this!”

The two of them simultaneously stepped strongly down on their respective boards and leaped.

They used the top of the stopped cars as jump platforms to make an even larger leap.

“It’s on!”

●

The two girls flew.

They looked down on the never-ending expanse of darkness and light that made up the night.

This was a view only someone in flight could see.

“…Ah.”

Both of them gasped at the night scenery of Akigawa.

“…”

They were above the wide two-lane road leading west of the municipal office and to JR Akigawa Station.

The two rows of streetlights continued straight for about three hundred meters where another intersection led to Akigawa Station.

That straightaway was their battlefield, so the two of them exchanged a glance.

“…!”

They took action as soon as their high-speed air ride came to an end.

On her way down, Brunhild collapsed backwards to perform a backflip.

She grabbed the broom between her right toes and left heel and rotated the broom four times to the right as she spun her body around.

As soon as she landed, she fired a burst of acceleration to the west.

On the other hand, Kazami moved up and pushed her feet into the sky.

As she flew, she spun the bottom of her shield ski through the sky and performed a vertical flip.

She was going to land ten meters in front of Brunhild, so Brunhild prepared an attack for that spot.

Kazami fell from five meters above the ground.

"…!!"

Brunhild raised Gram in her right hand.

Super thick writing on Gram's surface said "Heavy Rapid-Fire Homing Bullet Circle" and she rested Gram on her right shoulder.

Her body sank down below the weight and Gram opened up.

With a metallic sound, the cowling encasing the blade on either side opened up and emitted light.

A moment later, a circle of light appeared behind Brunhild.

Countless letters appeared in the red circle and even more dots appeared between those letters.

"————!"

Arcs of light shot from the dots and flew out in the hundreds.

Kazami's eyes opened wide as she looked back.

"That's just not fair!!"

"Don't you get it!? Gram is all of 1st-Gear! Even if you don't write out the mechanism, it can manifest anything you write on it!"

As if to prove her right, the streams of light bound together and pursued Kazami.

Kazami faced forward and accelerated as soon as her shield ski landed.

She slid along the road to evade.

"————!"

G-Sp2 pulled her along as she essentially waterskied along the road. She quickly slalomed back and forth to dodge and a spray of sparks came from the asphalt in her wake.

The group of red lines pursued her like a wave, but the red lights struck the cars she weaved between or crashed into the asphalt she grazed across.

The cars were destroyed by the concentrated fire and the asphalt turned to sand.

One hit would surely turn a human body into a spray.

The light poured down like red rain. It arced after Kazami and approached from every direction to envelop her.

But she repeatedly ducked between the roadside trees to quickly reduce the number of pursuing attacks.

She flapped her wings for a 360 degree flip to check things behind her and she flew out of the way of the red light.

"…!!"

Only a few dozen shots remained.

She flapped her wings for a great leap. When she passed over the roof of a large RV parked by the trees, she placed her hand on the roof and used her heels to kick the shield ski up and around to the front.

She ducked down as she and the shield ski landed on the road beyond the RV.

At the same time, the remaining light crashed into the back of the RV.

Sounds of destruction rang out.

The glass shattered, the metal broke, and the accumulated force sent the large RV into the air.

She ducked down and resumed sliding along the ground. Meanwhile, the RV's back end rose up and threatened to fall down on top of her.

However, she did not mind. She raised her right hand and used her blood to write "super light" on the bottom of the vehicle.

She then used her left index finger to lift the RV.

She spun it on her finger like a plate and instantly spun herself around.

She used that momentum to throw the RV back at Brunhild.

Kazami saw that Brunhild had already begun her next attack.

She had moved Gram around so it was resting backwards on her shoulder.

One side of the blade said "catapult" and Kazami saw the black cat standing on top of it.

The word "acceleration" on the cat's belly had been crossed out and a new term had been written on his back: shell.

"You don't mean…!"

Kazami's shout of surprise was followed by a red light racing from Gram's base and out to the tip.

As if riding on that light, the shell was launched.

It instantly produced an explosion of water vapor.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

And it cried out as it tore through the RV.

Pierced from the front to the back, the vehicle stopped moving in midair and bulged out a bit.

"!!"

It burst to pieces like it was made of paper.

Surrounded by a trail of mist, the shell flew straight toward Kazami.

●

Kazami spent a moment making up her mind.

If she fired G-Sp2, this shell was no threat.

However, she was hesitant to destroy this shell.

While she disliked shells, she did like cats. Loved them even.

And so she hesitated.

*…What should I do?*

She briefly thought about what the report on her death would say.

*…Field Operations Special Division and Team Leviathan member Kazami Chisato was killed in action by a cat.*

*Would they write "loved cats" on my grave? That would be an embarrassment to all my descendants. Then again, if I died now, I wouldn't have any descendants, would I?*

The shell was right in front of her.

"!"

She made a split-second decision and wrote on G-Sp2.

Her hint came from Izumo. He had once done something like this.

She wrote "Anti-Shell Metal Bat".

She held G-Sp2 near the bottom and swung the metal bat.

"Claaaaannnnnng!!"

She gave her own sound effect as she hit the shell and the slight squashing sensation at the moment of impact told her it had been a perfect hit.

With a great sound, the ball was sent right back toward the pitcher.

*Go,* she thought while clenching her fist and accelerating forward with G-Sp2.

*…Huh?*

"Couldn't I have just dodged instead of hitting it back?"

●

Brunhild saw the shell flying back toward her.

Their relative speed plus the batting effect made the shell's speed

greater than when she had fired it.

She considered writing “shield” on Gram to stop it, but that would smash the shell to pieces.

*…Which would get Gram and my clothes filthy!*

She made a split-second decision and raised a magic marker in her right hand.

She predicted the path of the flying shell and placed the marker in the spot its back would pass through.

“————!!”

When the cat’s back passed below the marker, a negating line was drawn through the word “shell”.

It all came down to an instant of action.

The black cat returned to being a cat, decelerated, and grabbed onto Brunhild’s left shoulder.

“U-u-u-um, Brunhild!! I-I need-I need to have a word with you!!”

“Yes.” Brunhild wrapped her left hand around the cat on her shoulder while soaring along the road with her broom. “I know exactly what you want to say. …Hitting a shell back with a metal bat? Just how absurd is that girl?”

“You’re ignoring the one who did all the work, you know?”

Brunhild did not answer him.

Kazami jumped to put some distance between them and she pointed G-Sp2 toward the ground.

It was clear what she was going to do.

“Fire into the ground!”

Exactly that happened and it produced a solid sound.

And it happened repeatedly.

Those shots had enough power to destroy a dragon, so they utterly destroyed the asphalt. The broken asphalt blasted skyward like geysers, but those areas were several meters in length and they instantly formed walls.

Brunhild had created a single large wall earlier, but Kazami tore into the ground to make walls of smaller fragments.

There was only one good countermeasure.

“Gram!”

Brunhild wrote the word “ocean” on Gram’s side.

“Add in that power!!”

While gliding along, she swung the long sword like a golf club and

struck the ground.

The asphalt transformed into an ocean.

The rising walls of broken pavement turned into cresting waves.

She would only be hit by a spray of water, so she continued on

She could see Kazami through the waves and the girl had begun waterskiing.

“Not bad!”

The girl gave her a confident smile, so Brunhild nodded in agreement.

Brunhild pursued her classmate whose position made her an enemy.

As she pursued, they both crossed a large intersection at almost the same moment.

They were only one hundred meters to Akigawa Station.

●

A light moved below the streetlights.

It was the light to a mountain bike.

But instead of riding it, someone was pushing it by the handlebars.

That person was Ooki who wore a jacket.

She pushed the bike with her left hand and held a cellphone in her right.

“Oh, Sibyl-san. I’ve collected Kazami-san’s bike, so don’t worry.”

She heard Sibyl’s apologetic voice over the phone.

“Testament. Thank you very much. It seems Chisato-sama was in quite a rush.”

“Immediate decisions are her thing. She changed inside the concept space and I collected that as well.”

“H-her clothes! I-I need to wash them, iron them, and return them!”

“You like to take care of everything, don’t you?”

“Testament. It is my thing.”

Ooki heard her add a “but”, so she looked into the night sky.

“Ooki-sama, how were things inside the concept space?”

“Hmm.”

Ooki thought on the question. After about three seconds, she gathered her eyebrows together.

“Well, it was night, it was cold, and there was no one there.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

There was a smiling tone to Sibyl’s voice, yet Ooki felt like she was being scolded.

*…Did I say something odd?*

She tilted her head, but Sibyl asked another question.

“Could you tell how Chisato-sama’s battle was going?”

*Oh, I get it now,* thought Ooki as she came to a stop.

There was a field to her left, houses to her right, and stars in the sky, but she stared straight forward.

This road likely ran alongside the larger Itsukaichi Road that Kazami and Brunhild had flown down.

Ooki narrowed her eyes.

“I think they’re full of energy.”

“Eh?”

Ooki smiled at Sibyl’s confusion.

“They’re probably having a great time exchanging blows right now. …Am I wrong?”

●

The road was made of black tar, but it acted like water.

The road had “30” written on it, so it contained a current flowing at that speed.

Kazami and Brunhild flew along the center line between lanes where the current differed.

Red light shot from Gram which had “rapid fire gun” written on it, so Kazami deflected it with the tip of her spear.

Kazami rotated around and fired G-Sp2, so Brunhild deflected it with “shield” Gram.

The two moved apart and produced a splash of asphalt as they drew an arc along it.

“!”

While gliding along the center of the road, spear clashed with sword.

A metallic sound rang out, sparks flew from their locked blades, and they moved apart just enough for more swordplay.

When Kazami jabbed, Brunhild deflected. When Brunhild swung, Kazami deflected.

But Kazami had the upper hand in close-quarters combat.

By jabbing in and pulling back, G-Sp2 could knock Gram outwards.

The sharp sound of metal shot out and sparks flew.

“————!”

Wind blew in from the front and Brunhild’s hand trembled as it held Gram.

She swung the blade straight toward Kazami, but the other girl seemed to wrap the strike around the spear tip and sent it outwards.

The witch frowned and clenched her teeth a little.

Attacking like this was not her specialty.

When a beginner attacked with a long weapon, they tended to be led around by its length and never put any real force behind their strikes.

With longer weapons, one had to focus on the base of the blade and the bottom of the hilt as they held it. They had to use it lightly while making sure they did not only slightly graze their enemy with the tip, but that was a tall order for a beginner like Brunhild.

Gram was a long sword, so it was bound by those rules even if it was light. And unlike a spear, the grip was short and the blade long, which only made those rules more important.

Once it was deflected, the weight of the blade would reach her hands and it took a while for a beginner to gain control again.

But Kazami did not hold back.

She moved straight in.

“This is over!”

She stared straight at the girl while jabbing her spear just as straight.

She was confident it would hit.

“!?”

But with a clang of steel, G-Sp2 was deflected by Gram.

●

Kazami’s eyes opened wide.

It may not have been perfect, but she had knocked Gram upwards and attacked the girl’s unguarded chest.

Brunhild did not have enough combat skill to instantly regain

control of Gram.

In fact, not even Kazami would have been able to regain control of such a long sword so quickly.

She could only keep up this high speed exchange of attack and defense because she held the long spear close to the top.

*…How did she do that!?*

Kazami gasped and saw something written on the side of the sword Brunhild lightly swung around.

“Short sword!?”

I probably should have done this from the beginning, but then I couldn’t have caught you off guard.”

Now the one left defenseless was Kazami.

She had poured her full strength into that strike, so she had not used a short grip on the spear.

She then saw Brunhild prepare Gram at her right hip.

The action pressed the blade’s tip against Kazami’s stomach.

She also saw words on the side of the sword.

“88 mm gun. You can’t hit it back at this range, can you?”

The blast rang out quickly.

●

Kazami acted on pure reflex.

She bent over to pull her stomach back and flapped her wings forward.

“…!”

She put as much space between her and Gram as she could.

A moment later, she lifted her right leg.

Brunhild’s eyebrows shot up.

“It’s no use!”

The end of her words was drowned out by the blast of the shot being fired.

At the same time, Kazami kicked something up with her right leg.

“The shield!”

It was G-Sp2’s shield she had been using as a ski.

She pressed her right leg against her chest and the bottom of the foot brought up the shield and placed it between her and the gun.

At the same time, the 88 mm shell of light exploded in the muzzle.

●

They clashed.

Kazami was blasted into the western sky with the speed of a shooting star and noise washed over Brunhild.

The black three-cornered hat fell from her head, but the witch did not care.

She looked to Kazami through the blowing wind and water vapor smoke.

The girl had crashed into the roof of a pachinko parlor to the west of the train station.

She had flown a long way. That was partially due to the force of the shellfire, but…

*…Did she use G-Sp2's acceleration to escape the blow!?*

It was the same idea as pulling your body back to reduce the damage from a punch.

But if she had done that…

"Is she still conscious!?"

If so, the battle would continue.

She quickly found a way to determine whether the girl was or not.

Over by Kazami, the "pa" of the neon sign saying "pachinko" had gone out due to poor maintenance. Being hit by that in this world of writing would be an embarrassment to every last one of her descendants[1], so Brunhild took action.

"Hit her!!"

"Brunhild, Brunhild. You're a girl too, so try to be a little considerate."

But Brunhild saw G-Sp2's cannon blow away the "chi" just before it hit.

That meant Kazami was still conscious.

"…!"

Now that she knew her enemy still intended to fight, Brunhild turned her broom toward the sky and truly flew.

Her destination was the twenty meters above the pachinko parlor with a large hole in the roof.

She instantly arrived in the air and peeled the cat from the broom.

After she wrote "wings" on his butt and had him cling to her back,

she could float without the broom.

"B-Brunhild! I have no idea what I am anymore!!"

"Don't worry. There is only one answer to that."

"Eh? What is it? A cute pet kitten? Or your beloved black cat?"

"…"

"D-don't fall silent! Tell me the answer, Brunhild!"

She ignored him, maintained her altitude with the wings, and placed the broom over her left shoulder.

She reinforced the broom with papers saying "magazine", "chamber", "loading point", "barrel", and "ignition device". She then placed some paper bullets along the base.

She had created a long cannon out of the broom.

She placed the Gram cannon alongside it.

"Double cannons!"

With that shout, she fired.

Her target was the crumbled roof of the pachinko parlor. Her enemy was below.

"Fire!!"

The flash of shellfire blossomed in the night sky.

The sounds shook the night air as she fired again and again.

The shells of paper and light were surrounded by shockwaves as they smashed the pachinko parlor below.

The shockwaves of impact sent the light materials of modern buildings flying like paper. The roof vanished after a few shots and the shockwaves inside the building blew out the walls from within.

In an instant, only the pillars remained and the explosions sent countless dots of light flying through the air.

They were silver balls.

They burst upwards like spraying water, shook in the noise of the blasts, and fell as they scattered wherever they pleased. Sometimes, the wreckage of a pachinko machine would fly up, but even those were sent scattering by the continuing shockwaves.

Despite all that, Brunhild would not stop.

"…!"

The most frightening thing about shellfire was not the shells themselves. The shockwave created when a physical shell flew and hit caused much more destruction than the simple area struck by the shell itself.

Even ten centimeters of concrete were easily smashed by a metal shell moving at high speed.

Kazami could only intercept one of the shells with G-Sp2. The fallen shockwaves shot back up into the air, but Kazami had no way of defending against it and she would be smashed to pieces.

Even if she tried to stop the shells, Brunhild was firing randomly. Kazami would be unable to determine where they would hit, so she would be struck from an unexpected direction.

So Brunhild continued firing.

*…Disappear!*

It would be easier if the girl simply vanished.

"…!!"

The broom ran out of ammunition. Smoke rose from the tip, but Brunhild was not going to let her enemy get away. She peeled off all of the paper and attached a single new paper.

She looked down at the broom while feeling a ringing in her ears from all the noise shaking her eardrums.

The broom now had "barrel addition" written on it.

She let out a breath, closed her eyes, swallowed to clear the ringing in her ears, and attached the barrel addition to Gram.

The cannon resting on her shoulder was now twice as long as she was tall and she added another word to Gram.

"Dragon cannon. …This final shot is a requiem from 1st-Gear."

Her numb ears could barely hear her own voice.

She realized her hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat and her breathing was heavy.

But she prepared the dragon cannon on her shoulder while dealing with them both.

Her target was the center of the pachinko parlor that still had three steel pillars. She aimed for the center of the rising dust.

She muttered "farewell" as she reached for the trigger.

"————"

The witch saw her enemy and those white wings.

Kazami was crouched on one knee within the dust.

"How did you survive all that?"

The answer was simple and Kazami gave the answer in a trembling voice.

She spoke even as her body shook from the remaining damage.

“Look around me.”

Brunhild did so and looked below the vanishing dust.

The red and white tiles of the floor came into view. The dust covered it like sand, but it was unharmed. And…

“Why are the bases of the pachinko machines still there?”

The tops of the machines had been torn away, but all of the bases remained from the floor to about waist height.

The surrounding light entering the pachinko parlor told Brunhild why.

Kazami’s right arm was raised and it held G-Sp2’s shield. Brunhild saw what the girl had written on it.

“Floor.”

“That’s right. When a shockwave is produced on the ground, it escapes up into the air, so you won’t be harmed if you place yourself lower than the floor. If you can’t escape an explosion, they tell you to hide below the lowest part of the ground and cover yourself with something, right? Also…”

Kazami weakly stood and lifted her left hand.

That hand held a pennant-style poster.

“Can you see what it says? ‘Hit the jackpot’. I quickly scattered just the ‘hit’ portion along the four edges of the ceiling and that guided most of the shell hits.”

The broken parts of G-Sp2’s cowling were slowly regenerating.

Brunhild had heard about this. During the battle with 7th-Gear, G-Sp2 and V-Sw had combined their power to heal themselves and to save Kazami when she was on the verge of death.

That was special even for a Concept Core. She had heard that had not happened again since and Kazami was not rapidly recovering now. The weapon had rescued its master when she had admitted to her own mistake, but the rest was that master’s own responsibility.

*…What a cold concept weapon.*

However, that likely meant that the weapon trusted its master.

That turned Brunhild’s thoughts toward Gram on her right shoulder.

“…”

She shook her head and gave a self-deprecating smile as she looked down.

Kazami was standing on trembling legs and trying to raise G-Sp2.

She was still enough of an enemy, so Brunhild did not hold back.

She pulled the trigger and bared her teeth in a smile.

“You’re pretty cool, Kazami. But I saw what happened when you flew in here before.”

She gave a shout while firing.

“You ‘nko’ girl!!”

●

Light from the surface intercepted the light from the sky.

They collided and exploded with a sound like shattering glass.

An explosion of light covered the ground for several hundred meters in every direction.

The entire station area was instantly turned to scorched earth.

A great force of air spread out beyond the explosion and transformed into a powerful wind.

The staticky sound of the air resembled crashing waves.

The witch in black was blasted into the heavens and she flew through the sky with the acceleration of the broom in her right hand.

“…!!”

She trembled from the great sound of the dragon cannon and dragon spear clashing below.

But something broke through that tremor.

Spear-wielding wings ascended through the dragon’s roar.

“Kazami!?”

G-Sp2 used all of its thrust to stab up from below, so Brunhild released her broom behind her.

The cat on her back grabbed onto the broom while inside her collar. Brunhild felt like she was being tugged on the back of the neck as the cat and the broom pulled her straight up into the heavens.

She wrote “shield” on Gram, grasped it by the blade and hilt, and held it forward to protect her.

But G-Sp2 crashed into it.

“!?”

She was instantly pushed into the heavens.

“Wha-!?”

This new thrust far outdid that of her broom. She doubled over as

Gram pressed against her stomach and pushed her into the sky.

"…!!"

She tried in vain to protest, but her body was quickly taken away.

She was looking down on Tokyo now.

She passed through some white clouds and cried out as she felt the chill of their high altitude.

"Kazami! What are you-…"

She did not finish her question.

She had noticed that Kazami's eyes were squeezed shut.

*…It can't be.*

"Did that explosion blind and deafen you?"

Her senses were numbed.

Even in this attack, she would only know that she had hit.

But even after hitting, she continued to rise and never stopped accelerating.

*…All to defeat me.*

They had ascended to the stratosphere, but that was apparently not enough.

"You're willing to go this far to defeat me!?"

Brunhild clenched her teeth.

*…It wasn't enough.*

What had that barrage of shells mattered? Or the dragon cannon?

Around her, she saw the heavenly dome of the night, the vast nightscape, and the darkness between the mountains.

The distant horizon was slightly curved.

*…Is this the height of her primary battlefield?*

Had Brunhild made any attack on this level?

"You stupid girl," she muttered.

She bent forward until she was close enough to kiss the girl and found her eyes were ever-so-slightly open.

Despite her limp expression, her unfocused eyes looked to the sky and the surface.

"Can you see it? This area is where we live."

Kazami looked around at the distant lights of the cities.

"I can hear it."

"Hear what?"

Kazami did not answer. She simply closed her eyes.

"Let's go."

With those words, the sensation pressing up against Brunhild vanished.

Kazami had released her and she knew what that meant.

*…I'll fall to the ground from here.*

*Ah,* she thought just as she flipped around and began to fall face-up.

She dove from the heavens with her back pointed down.

"Ahhhhhh!" shouted the cat on her back. "Don't have me looking down!"

But she ignored the cat's protests. An attack came from the heavens above.

It was G-Sp2.

Kazami closed her wings and accelerated straight down for another collision.

As the reverse of before, she was hitting Brunhild from above.

She caught the blow with Gram again, but…

"…!!"

The thrust far outdid the speed of her fall and there was nothing she could do to fight it.

"Kazami!"

She released her cracking voice into the sky.

"Are you really planning to crash into the surface from this height!?"

Kazami smiled and answered.

"Is there any point in answering that?"

●

The sound of an electronic motor filled the air.

It was the low, muffled sound of a spinning fan.

It came from a powerful vacuum cleaner.

The sound filled a room made up of two connected rooms. The detached room had a ten square meter space with wood flooring and an equally large space with tatami mats.

With her uniform's coat removed, Shinjou ran the vacuum cleaner along the wooden flooring.

She wore a borrowed pink apron and she glanced to the sofa set in the center of the wood-floored room. She also looked to the large window left open to air out the room.

She finally looked to the TV placed next to the window and then switched off the vacuum cleaner.

"Sayama-kun, the TVs at your home sure are fancy. They have buttons to change the channel instead of knobs."

"Shinjou-kun, what did you think our dorm room's TV was? It is fully controlled by the remote."

"Oh, c'mon. Quit lying. That isn't a TV. It's a type of monitor. You can't have a TV without something to change the channel."

She checked behind the TV to make sure she had vacuumed behind it.

She straightened the bottom of the apron and glanced over to Sayama in the tatami mat room.

A butt was sticking out of the dark closet at the far end of that room.

It was Sayama's butt.

Whenever his butt or legs moved to keep his balance, she heard a sound of avalanching metal and other objects from the closet.

She had handled the general cleaning of the room while he dealt with the important things and anything best not messed with. His primary job had been checking through the drawers, closets, and other such spaces. He was the only one who could check to see if his parents had left any kind of records behind.

Shinjou could not help but be worried about one thing.

*…Are his chest pains okay?*

He was probably feeling it this entire time, but she had decided not to do anything unless he collapsed, stopped moving, or asked for help. She had also decided to ignore him if he said anything strange.

While worrying about that, she cleaned the wooden flooring with a dry mop.

She had used the room's intercom to ask Ryouko for the cleaning supplies. For some reason, she would hear sounds of movement from below the corridor's floor and above its ceiling and the supplies would appear in front of the room.

*…I think I'll avoid asking why they don't show themselves.*

At that point, Sayama stopped moving as he rummaged through the closet behind her.

Fearing the worst, she froze too.

She turned around and found his balancing butt and legs had

stopped.

"Sayama-kun, are you okay?"

"Ha ha ha. What are you talking about, Shinjou-kun? There has never been a single thing wrong with me."

"Really? Then I guess you are okay."

"Your note of understanding and your comment seem a bit disconnected to me."

Ignoring that, she tilted her head and asked the question in her heart.

"Did you find something?"

"Yes, and I suppose it will see the light of day for the first time in nine years."

"Eh?"

She frowned and he answered her question.

"Yes. I found one of IAI's orphan anime roach traps 'Roach Hutch'. It's a pun on the character named Hutch from a popular anime at the time."

Shinjou decided to remain silent, but he let out a warm sigh.

"But after nine years, the number of residents has grown quite a bit. Now Hutch will never be lonely."

"You don't have to give the details. And you don't have to bring it out to show me. You don't, okay!?"

"But Shinjou-kun, I want you to understand the value of what I hold in my hands."

"You can throw that value out in the trash!"

She threw the mop handle at his butt and he reacted by bending back and falling inside the closet.

She panicked when she heard him crash into the wooden closet wall and felt the room shake.

"Ah! S-Sayama-kun, I'm sorry! I acted on impulse!"

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, everything is fine. I managed to hold onto Hutch."

"Stoooooppppp!!"

The previous shaking must have knocked something loose because a ceiling board near the closet shifted aside and a white cardboard box fell out of the ceiling.

She cried out and saw the box land inside the room's light.

It landed perfectly with a dull sound and the light washed over it.

“S-Sayama-kun. A box just fell from the ceiling. What was that? Hitting the wall to make something fall sounds like a hidden item from a recent video game. Ooh, I bet it has a 1-up inside.”

“Shinjou-kun, I have a feeling you lose a life if the hidden item crushes you. Especially given my current situation.”

Sayama could speak despite being crushed, so no lives had been lost and that meant everything was okay.

Shinjou breathed a sigh of relief and looked to the cardboard box that had crushed the butt sticking out from the closet.

The top of the box was sealed with a charm and she read what it said.

“ ‘Serves you right. –Sayama Kaoru’ ”

What was this and what was going on?

She held her breath at those questions but then looked to Sayama as he lay below the box.

“Like grandfather, like grandson.”

---

[1] Chinko means penis.

# Chapter 5

## “Irresponsible House”

What am I supposed to do about this?

●

There was light. That white light came from the ceiling of a room with wooden flooring.

A light brown sofa sat in the light and a white cardboard box sat on the central white table.

Two people sat on the sofa in front of the box that was sealed with a charm signed with the name Sayama Kaoru.

“Shinjou-kun, stand back. I will open it, but it might explode.”

“Was your grandfather really that exciting a person?”

Shinjou tilted her head and lightly tapped the edge of the box with her right hand.

She looked to the left where Sayama was frowning.

“And if it was going to explode, it would have done so when it fell on you earlier. Right?”

She smiled to reassure him and tapped the side of the box.

She then heard something switch on inside.

“…”

Her smile froze on her face and she did not move her hand from the box.

“This is all too sudden, but can I take back everything I just said?”

“For you, I will allow it.”

He gave a refreshing laugh.

“Would you like some help, Shinjou-kun?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing at all. Now, how about you remove all your clothes to lighten the load?”

“What do you think you’re doing!? And what is wrong with your brain!?”

She sighed and kept her eyes on the hand touching the box.

“Besides, I couldn’t remove the sleeve even if I tried to take them off. Too bad.”

“So it would have to be a naked shirt.”

“What kind of contradictory genre name is that?”

“Calm down,” he said while casually pulling a stethoscope from his pocket.

Shinjou swallowed the words she wanted to say and silently watched him press the stethoscope against the box.

“Hm. I can hear something moving. Perhaps a clock.”

“This is just getting more and more exciting, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

He nodded and pressed the stethoscope against her chest with a perfectly serious expression.

“I see. You do seem to be getting excited. …The pounding of your heart is giving me a message in Morse code: L-O-V-E. An anagram for ELO + V for victory!”

“Ero is spelled with an R!!”

She used her open left hand to grab the stethoscope and pound it five times on the white table.

A hard sound rang out and Sayama gave a large jerk for each time the sound reached him directly through the device.

She frowned and spoke into the stethoscope’s cup.

“What are you going to do about whatever’s inside?”

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, that was enough force to just about make my ears bleed.”

He brushed up his bangs while Baku emulated him on his head.

“…”

With a snap of his left wrist, something appeared in that hand.

“A knife? Wait, Sayama-kun. Are you going to open it?”

He was taking action without doing anything about whatever was inside.

Her pulse began to race and she placed her left hand on his right shoulder.

Before she could ask him to stop, his left hand raced forward to slice open his grandfather’s seal.

“Do you remember what I said before, Shinjou-kun?”

She frowned and thought about his question while sensing danger in his actions.

*…What he said before?*

“You can hear something moving and it might be a clock.”

Even as she answered, she realized what he meant.

“You didn’t say it was a time bomb.”

“Correct. I also heard something light rolling around. Therefore, it is a clock and not a bomb. The switch was likely a dummy.”

He opened the box and they both looked inside.

He had been half right.

There was a clock loose inside the box. It was an old pocket watch.

However, the bottom of the box was covered in red cylinders of dynamite.

They were packed in tightly like bricks and the words “ten more seconds” were written on top of them.

Shinjou exchanged a glance with Sayama and smiled.

“You didn’t see this coming, did you?”

“No. It wouldn’t roll around when packed in this tightly. That old man could be so neurotic.”

“Yes, yes. He was very thorough. Now, to be thorough on our end, how many seconds left?”

“Precisely three.”

“Throw it away!!”

He stood up, ran toward the yard, tore apart the box, and threw it.

A moment later, an explosion reached her as a blast of wind.

●

Sayama saw the large pond in the Tamiya house’s yard blow up.

The heavy cardboard plunged into the water like it was being swallowed and it exploded just as it started to float back up.

*What a spiteful old man,* thought Sayama as the blast washed over the yard.

A bomb that was activated by opening the box did not need a dummy switch or a dummy clock. And it had even had plenty of time to throw it into the pond after opening it.

*…Almost as if he knew I would do this.*

Sayama looked up at the water that had blasted up into the night sky.

The pond’s koi had moved to the deep bottom of the pond for winter, so the only animal affected was the reptilian pet belonging to Seizou, the previous head of the Tamiya family. Based on the direction it flew in, it would likely land in the house across the road, so simply put, Kouji was going to have some extra trouble to deal with.

“No problems here.”

As he muttered that, he heard the front door open and Kouji run

out. His footsteps sounded overly heavy, so he was likely carrying a pile of confection sets.

Soon, rain smelling faintly of algae began to fall.

"…"

The spray of water hit the ground, his shoulders, and his head, so Sayama put what he held into his pocket, removed his coat, and held it over his head.

He heard Ryouko's distant voice from the main building.

"Young masterrrr! Are you okay?"

"You should be more worried about your neighbors who lack a proper sense of tension. They are probably in a panic right now."

"Wow. You're so calm, young master."

After her smiling voice, he heard the door close, so he looked behind him. Despite the wind, the detached room was relatively unharmed. The cloth on the sofa had blown off, but that was about it.

*…How nostalgic.*

Long ago, he had seen that room lit up like this.

Even at night, he had been able to play safely in the yard and he had always found his parents when he reentered the light.

Now, he had Shinjou instead of his parents and the pain in his chest was added to the mix.

*…When I returned here after my mother's death, I was terribly opposed to going into that room.*

He had moved to the room next to his grandfather's in the main building and his life centered on his grandfather had begun.

His left hand was holding up his coat, so he looked to his right hand. It held the pocket watch from the box.

It was the type a civilian working for the military received as an officer and it had not been tampered with.

"Is this memento of the National Defense Department left for me? And one from everyday life at that."

He thought to himself as he walked toward the detached room.

*…Come to think of it, this is the first proper memento I have gotten other than the Leviathan Road and a few odds and ends.*

He felt he would never have found it without pursuing the Leviathan Road, but he also felt that might have been different if his parents had not died. But…

*…That is something I would like to discuss with Shinjou-kun.*

He no longer had to think about these things on his own.

He nodded, returned to the room, and heard a sound.

The TV in the wood floor room was on and Shinjou was watching it from the sofa.

“Shinjou-kun.”

He called out to her, but she did not turn around. She was bent forward a bit watching the TV.

The news was on.

“Oh? Is it about video games? …The major companies Kimco and Gandai are merging? Will the new company name be Kintam? It seems to me the end would have a rising intonation, but what do you think, Shinjou-kun?”

She still did not turn around.

“Shinjou-kun?”

He placed a hand on her shoulder and she gently fell to the side and lazily lay there.

She looked up at him from below.

“Do you have something to say?”

He thought for a while and finally found his answer.

“The new company name could also be Ganco, couldn’t it!?”

“Enough of that!! Get over here and sit down!!”

She got up and patted on the empty spot on the sofa.

He wondered what this was about.

*…She is asking me to sit down?*

*It is impossible avoid having my imagination run wild. What is she going to do? Is there an ear-cleaning set? There is, there is, there is! Is there enough space to rest on her lap? There is, there is, there is! I am ready for anything!*

“Sayama-kun, why are you folding your coat so happily?”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, why are you glaring at me so happily?”

“————!!”

She turned her back and slapped the sofa’s armrest several times.

*Can she not wait any longer? Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, when you are this excited, it fills me with excitement, too.*

“But calm down, Shinjou-kun. We cannot speak unless you are calm.”

“Oh? You actually intend to speak?”

She corrected her posture to face him, but she was still glaring.

“Um, is it just me or are things more intense than usual today?”

“I see nothing out of the ordinary for a collaboration between the Sayama family and the Tamiya family.”

“Do you ‘ordinarily’ find bombs in your house?”

“You do here.”

Shinjou glared silently at him with her mouth hanging open, so Sayama nodded.

“This is a simple difference between household environments. You make your omelets sweet, but we make them a little salty here. This is the same thing.”

“I really feel like you’re trying to avoid the issue.”

“Then should I start having mine sweet too? That way you can make them for me.”

She looked surprised by that question.

“No, um, well. I do know you’re changing the subject to avoid the issue, but…”

She looked at him with a troubled expression.

“I can make a salty one too next time.”

“Whatever you like is what I am most willing to accept.”

“But I’ve never tried them salty.”

She thought for a bit and nodded.

“I need to try it both ways. Yes. …Wait! I just tried out something even stranger! This house is too strange!! Is it a salty flavor!? No, it’s a mystery flavor. It’s twenty-one different flavors!”

As she raised her voice, the room’s intercom rang and Ryouko’s voice came from it.

“Setsu-chan? Setsu-chan? Did you just say something about my house?”

Shinjou frantically shook her head and a quiet laugh came from the intercom before it cut off.

Shinjou fell silent and the sound of the TV filled the room.

In that relative silence, she gave a weary sigh and Sayama patted her shoulder a few times.

“You will get used to it. Humans are very adaptable and their preferences can change.”

“I think there are some exceptions to that.”

She hung her head, but…

"…"

She looked up again. The ends of her eyebrows were lowered in a troubled smile.

"Well, whatever might happen, I can't just stop talking, can I? But…"

She looked to the empty table.

"If that box was a dummy too, does that mean we got nothing out of this?"

"It is too soon to say that, Shinjou-kun."

Sayama pulled something from the pocket of his coat that sat folded next to him.

"That damn old man had created a false bottom below the box. I cut it open and found this."

It was a single document with a printed title.

"This is the authorization for my mother's job."

●

Shinjou gasped below the light.

She read the document Sayama held out to her.

"Japanese UCAT General Affairs Department Third Manager Sayama Yume is appointed as manager of the 'Study'. –March 25, 1985."

That was all it said.

*…This is related to what Ryouko-san mentioned, isn't it?*

Sayama's mother had worked somewhere other than UCAT.

*…And that place was called the "Study".*

"What was this 'Study'? I wonder where it was."

"Can you think of any possibilities?"

Shinjou could only tilt her head at Sayama's question.

For one thing, her idea of a study was a kind of personal office.

*…But Sayama-kun said the study at Kinugasa's residence was the same sort of thing.*

She made a guess using Kinugasa Tenkyou as a starting point.

"The Kinugasa Library?"

But was there really a study in that stepped library? It could not be in the counter and the preparation room in the back had no doors.

"Is it hidden with a concept space?"

"It is not. The study really is there. It is just hidden in some other way."

Hearing Sayama speak, she asked about what he meant.

"Do you think it's in the Kinugasa Library too?"

"Yes. If you spend enough time at that school, you will eventually find that place somewhat strange. …This simply means I have evidence to back that up. When we gather at the library later, we can all search together."

He crossed his arms and had a smile on his face.

"But this has gotten interesting. Back when Siegfried showed me the group photo from the National Defense Department days, he said his predecessor had found it."

"You mean…he was referring to your mother?"

She chose her words carefully, but he did not nod in agreement.

Instead, he chose his own words carefully.

"My mother helped my father. The two of them visited Professor Kinugasa's house together. They searched through what he had left behind because my father wanted to produce weaponry to fight Top-Gear and my mother wanted to gather information to use against Top-Gear. So if she managed the 'Study' in the Kinugasa Library…"

He crossed his arms.

"I told you about the scenes of Professor Kinugasa's past I saw, didn't I? In the Kinugasa Document, he said he had sealed Georgius 'in a place I know very well'. That place may have been this 'Study'."

"…!?"

Shinjou let out a gasp of surprise, but Sayama simply continued.

"I have no proof. After all, he said he had hidden the negative Georgius while my mother left me with the positive Georgius. But…"

"He still said he sealed it in a place he knew very well, right?"

In other words…

"What if Georgius was sealed inside the 'Study' somehow and your mother couldn't remove the seal?"

"Excellent reasoning, Shinjou-kun. This is worth investigating."

As he spoke, he pulled out his cellphone, set it to speakerphone, and called a saved number.

He breathed in two seconds later.

"Sibyl-kun? It is I. I know you are busy, but I would like for you to look into something."

Namely…

"I want information on the Kinugasa Library's previous librarian. The one who preceded Mr. Siegfried. Please ask the general affairs department."

He moved the phone from his mouth so Shinjou could hear Sibyl's voice.

"Testament."

After a pause…

"As I expected, there is no information on Siegfried-sama's predecessor."

Shinjou quietly listened to the voice.

"Siegfried-sama took over as librarian on January 7, 1996. That was the beginning of the third term that year."

Sibyl seemed to have realized something as she spoke because a hesitant tremor filled her voice.

"Um, Sayama-sama?"

"Mr. Siegfried took over as librarian just after the blank period ended. It was only two weeks after Top-Gear's destruction on December 25, 1995. Do you have a question about that?"

"No…"

Sibyl could be heard breathing in, but after a few seconds, her clear voice returned.

"Testament. I do not know the situation, but I can say one thing: Have a good past, Sayama-sama."

"Thank you," said Sayama before ending the call and looking to Shinjou.

He crossed his arms and a smile appeared on the corner of his mouth.

"…"

He let out a breath and leaned back into the sofa.

He stretched his arms up onto the back of the sofa.

"We still have no proof, but it seems to all come back to the Kinugasa Library."

"Before we leave for the Leviathan Road and to search for my mom's past, it looks like we'll be searching for the 'Study'."

Shinjou also leaned back in the sofa and he nodded with a bitter

smile while pulling out a pocket watch.

"But we still have an hour until our meeting in the library. …How about a cup of tea?"

He spoke with a carefree tone and looked around with a bitter smile.

*…Does this place bring back a lot of memories?*

She also looked around at the room she had become slightly familiar with through cleaning it.

It contained a few dressers, bookcases, and containers.

He had once lived here.

*…And now he lives with me in that small dorm room.*

This room had been left empty after losing its residents, but what had Sayama lost and what had he gained?

"…" Shinjou silently leaned up against him.

She had realized one thing.

After her trip to Sakai a month and a half ago, she had told him her body was now fully functioning. He had rejoiced and celebrated, and she had been forced to give her usual retorts when he took it too far.

But ever since then, he had not checked on her body.

He may have thought there was no longer a need.

She did not know whether he was forsaking her or treating her with care. He had said nothing about it and was avoiding the subject.

However, she had decided how she would think about the issue.

*…I won't let my doubts get the better of me like I did in the spring.*

And now, he had once more stepped into this location from his past and he had shown it to her.

This was something he had avoided for so very long.

*…Is this the reverse side of treating something with care?*

He would surely have the place cleaned and treated with even more care.

*Someday. Someday surely,* she thought.

*…Will the same thing happen with me?*

Instead of simply treating her with care, would he step through the door and treat her with even more care?

She looked to him as she thought and their eyes met as he looked

around the room.

"What is it, Shinjou-kun? Did my charm get the better of you?"

"No, sorry. I feel like a lot was just ruined."

She smiled bitterly and he gave a similar smile in return.

He sighed, relaxed his shoulders, and looked around more cheerfully.

"I wonder if there is a photo album in here. How about it, Shinjou-kun?"

"H-how about what?"

She had thought about this earlier and she found herself growing flustered when he chose to show her even more of his past.

*…Ah, why am I so pathetic?*

She knew he was showing a lot of resolve behind that expressionless face. She might have been imagining it and it might have been a misunderstanding, but she wanted to believe she understood.

So she asked a question.

"Can I really?"

"Yes," he replied quietly. "Tonight, we will be travelling west together. There, we will complete the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear. After that difficult but moving journey, we will head to Sakai for the climax of our tear-jerking pursuit of your parents' footsteps. But when that happens…"

He took a breath.

"I will undoubtedly see your past. I will see a precious past that involves your parents."

Hearing that, she realized what he was trying to say.

If he was going to see her past…

"You'll show me your past?"

"Ha ha. I used to be an unbelievably stupid child. Nothing at all like I am now."

Was he serious or joking? Either way, she knew he was being sincere.

And so she nodded.

*I need to make up my mind here,* she thought. *I need to share all sorts of things with him.*

They did not have much time. That was not enough time to go over all of the past that he had never told anyone and that he could

not bring himself to remember, but…

*…If this is just the beginning…*

“Will you show me, Sayama-kun? What were you like when you were little?”

He laughed bitterly again. He must have actually found the album earlier because he began to walk toward the closet.

“…”

But then he stopped.

He would often suspiciously start or stop moving without notice, so that was not enough to bother Shinjou. What she found odd was how tense he was.

When she tilted her head and looked up at him, she found he was looking out the open window.

The window let in the cold night air and gave a view of the yard.

The people of the Tamiya house were working to fix the damage done by the previous explosion in the pond. They were cleaning up the rocks scattered from the bottom of the pond, the water that had formed puddles around, and the leaves knocked down by the wind.

“Oh, we should probably help too.”

Belatedly realizing that, Shinjou wondered if they would have to wait until another time for Sayama’s photo album.

But then she noticed what he was looking at.

It was a small form helping the others gather the fallen leaves.

The kimono-wearing girl had a crutch under her left arm and she was a short distance from the rest of the group. But she suddenly turned toward Sayama and Shinjou.

“————”

Shinjou froze in place just like Sayama. The girl did as well.

A chilly and quiet wind blew through and it carried a voice. It was Kouji’s after finishing his greetings out front.

“Young master, Setsu-kun, have you not met her yet?”

Shinjou heard Kouji introduce the girl.

“Her name is Tamiya Shino. Due to her circumstances, we’re taking care of her here for the time being.”

# Chapter 6

## “The Voice Within”

What you hear is the voice within
Is it a scream that is asking for help?
Or is it a hopeful relief?

●

Soaking in hot water loosened up the body.

It encouraged even blood flow and allowed all muscles to gently function without any strain.

If one stretched out their legs and leaned their head back in that state, they would naturally let out a voice.

“This water is amazing… Don’t you think, Brunhild? Today, Sunflower is doing their lemon bath.”

“That only stings my injuries, Kazami.”

Kazami looked up to the ceiling while sitting in the Eternal Sunflower’s women’s bath with her elbows and back on the edge of the tub. Brunhild sat on the edge with a towel wrapped around her and her legs soaking in the water.

“C’mon. Try to get along, you two.”

Ooki was using an upside-down bucket in place of a float and she smiled at Kazami and Brunhild.

“I’m just glad neither of you were hurt. You call me after falling from the stratosphere and the first thing you ask for is a change of clothes.”

“I’m really sorry about worrying you like that.”

Kazami smiled bitterly and rested her head on the tub’s edge to fully face upwards. She then placed a folded towel over her forehead and eyes.

After hiding her expression like that, she gave another relaxed sigh.

“So. What’s going to happen with 1st-Gear, Brunhild?”

“I sent a paper to Fasolt saying I had lost with Gram.”

Kazami listened to the other girl’s quiet voice.

Gram and G-Sp2 were leaning up against the inner wall of the tub.

“Relaxed?” said G-Sp2’s console.

The side of Gram’s blade likely said “excellent water”.

Brunhild spoke up again with slight tension in her voice.

“I didn’t expect Gram to suddenly grow so heavy.”

“Neither did I.”

Kazami chose to simply agree.

After the battle, Kazami and Brunhild had left the concept space

after making sure Ooki had reserved the bath.

But by that time, Brunhild could no longer carry Gram.

Even so, it was perfectly light in Kazami's grasp. The same for Ooki. There was only one way to interpret this.

*…Gram is no longer lightening itself for the people of 1st-Gear?*

Brunhild had likely informed Fasolt of that.

The 1st-Gear reservation would have a new issue to deal with. Even if they did reclaim their Concept Core, it would not lend them its power.

*…Is Gram telling them that it's meaningless to try the same thing over and over again?*

Their world had been destroyed and their Concept Core stolen, but they had to start anew from there.

"And that must mean accepting their defeat."

"Hm? Did you say something, Kazami-san?"

"Don't bother, Ooki-sensei. This stupid girl always gets lost in thought when she tries thinking about anything remotely difficult."

"Shut up," said Kazami as she sat up.

The towel fell from her face, so she placed it behind her.

She felt the weight of her steam-soaked hair, so she collapsed forward and dunked her head underwater.

*…Nn.*

After feeling the ticklishness of the warm water entering her ears, she straightened back up.

She let out a breath as the splashing and flowing water surrounded her.

As she brushed up her bangs and the water, she saw something floating in front of her.

"What's with this duck? Ooki-sensei, bringing in toys is against the rules."

"Eh? B-but I went to all the trouble of buying it at the convenience store with your underwear."

*What did the store clerk think?* wondered Kazami as she turned to Ooki who was soaking up to her shoulders.

"It's great being able to stretch out your legs."

"Can't you get a bigger bath at home?"

"No, no. I'm not that rich," frantically denied the teacher.

Kazami smiled bitterly, sank down to her shoulders, and kicked

off the tiles on the bottom to move backwards.

Ripples spread around her shoulders and neck and she looked up and to the right once her back reached the tiled edge.

“Aren’t you going to get in, Brunhild?”

“I’d catch your germs.”

Kazami almost replied to that blunt answer, but she tilted her head instead.

*…Well, I guess she doesn’t want to end up like Ooki-sensei.*

Ooki was in the center of the tub playing with a bucket and a rubber duck. The bath was large, so Kazami felt she should use more of the space to play.

*…She could swim. Maybe dive in and swim to the other end.*

She liked diving in on her back, but everyone had different preferences. It was also possible Ooki was only pretending to play to put them at ease after their battle.

*…Is she?*

Kazami mentally tilted her head and turned to Brunhild who still sat on the edge.

“Aren’t you going to get in?”

She asked again and Brunhild responded.

The girl gave a half-hearted sigh and completely averted her gaze.

“I just don’t feel like making friends with you.”

“Oh?”

Kazami smiled and suddenly tugged on Brunhild’s legs to throw her into the tub.

●

As a splash of hot water rose into the air, Kazami stood up and shouted into the large echoing bath.

“Stop trying to act tough, you loser!! It’s over already!”

More water shot up as Brunhild stood.

The splashing sounds multiplied while she bristled her eyebrows and used both hands to sweep her long hair back.

“What!? Are you trying to start round two, you stupid girl!?”

Kazami replied by baring her teeth in a smile and snatching Brunhild’s towel.

She had left herself far too open while sweeping back her hair.

Not to mention…

"Didn't you see the sign!? Don't get in the tub with a towel on!"

She lifted the girl's slender body onto her shoulder and threw her down.

Brunhild rotated as she fell into the water and the towel was stripped from her. With the towel still on her shoulder, Kazami smiled and put her hands on her hips.

"Ha ha ha. What's this about a round two? You don't stand a chance."

After about seven more laughs, Kazami noticed something odd.

She had yet to hear Brunhild come back up from the water.

Ooki also tilted her head in the middle of the tub.

"Did she drown?"

"I seriously doubt it," answered an annoyed Kazami.

At the same time, she noticed something moving down at the bottom of the tub. She saw a wavering image of Brunhild at the tiles below Kazami's own feet.

*…Is that an oil crayon?*

She was able to make out the black writing.

*…"Banana peel"?*

Kazami slipped backwards with no resistance and her back sank into the tub.

Sound grew muffled to tell her she was underwater and she quickly turned toward the floor while making sure not to swallow any water.

She saw the word "catapult" written on the tile floor.

Fired from within the water, Kazami crashed head-first into the tub's inner wall.

An almost metallic sound filled the water, but it took her a second to realize it was the sound of her skull colliding with the tile.

"D-dammit! You've still got some fight in you, don't you!?"

With a splash of water, Kazami stood up while holding her head.

She took in a breath, turned around, and saw Brunhild standing five meters away.

She approached the girl as if parting the water.

"Hmph."

She puffed out her chest and stepped confrontationally in front of Brunhild.

"Are you sure you want to fight?"

She looked down on Brunhild's head and into the tub.

She then coquettishly brushed her hair back with her right hand.

"Don't think you have an advantage in an underwater battle just because your body creates less drag."

"All you have is excess flesh and unnecessary muscle, you violent girl."

*Dammit. You're just asking for a fight, aren't you?* thought Kazami. *But fine.*

*…This is probably the last time we can do this.*

In three more months, they would graduate and go their separate ways. And before that, they were only a few days from December 25 when they would have to decide whether to release the concepts or not.

The world might change then.

If that happened, this kind of exchange would probably become impossible.

With that in mind, Kazami looked down on Brunhild with a smile on her face.

"Excess flesh, hm? That just means I have plenty to spare. As long as it's well-balanced, it doesn't matter."

"It's all in how you say it, isn't it? …It just means you're evenly fat. Why not visit a butcher to help you out?"

"Oh, oh. The complaints of the needy are so wonderful. …If you don't like being so flat, you just have to grow some more. Hm, but I guess that's not possible in your case. Everything you eat goes straight to that argumentative brain of yours."

She tapped Brunhild's head and gave a sympathetic smile, so Brunhild clenched her teeth.

Brunhild showed off her canines and grabbed Kazami's hand.

"Are you picking a fight with 1st-Gear?"

Kazami looked up with a serious look on her face and saluted.

"Ma'am, you want to know if I am picking a fight with 1st-Gear? Are all women from 1st-Gear lacking in the chest department? If so,

then I am indeed picking a fight with all of 1st-Gear."

"Sh-shut up, you idiotic girl!!"

Brunhild pushed away Kazami's hand and pointed at her face.

"If you think my body is lacking, then your brain is lacking! You… tiny-brained woman!"

"Then are you large-brained?"

"That's right. My brain is well-endowed while yours is flat as a board! I'll call you flat-brained for short!"

*Wow, this took a weird turn,* thought Kazami as she tried to remain calm.

*…If I get fired up too, we'll just be exchanging insults.*

"Hmph! You don't have anything to say to that, do you? I guess I shouldn't have expected a functioning brain from someone with such a stupid guy!"

That fired Kazami up. Her brain shifted up about three gears.

"This has nothing to do with Kaku! You and your poor, dried-up chest need to leave Kaku out of this!"

As she shouted, she sent countless horizontal chops against Brunhild's chest.

"Oh, what's this!? Miss Kazami is sending out a storm of chops! They sound wonderful against that perfectly flat chest!"

Brunhild ducked below the chops and held her hands out. *Oh, no,* thought Kazami.

"Why you…!! Slap, slap, slap! It must be a pain having these things that can't even avoid a slap!!"

Kazami soon grabbed Brunhild's slapping hands.

They tried to claw at each other's hands and slammed their foreheads together.

They both let out a growl and Brunhild looked up at Kazami.

"What are you going to do about the Leviathan Road!?"

Kazami gained strength from those echoing words, so she took a single breath before replying.

"What are *you* going to do about 1st-Gear!?"

"Hah! We'll manage somehow! You're the ones that aren't up to the task! And after you acted so self-important and hit me! …The Gears are all pretty shaken and you still have to deal with Top-Gear, don't you!? What are you going to do!?"

"We'll manage somehow, too!"

Kazami sank down grabbed Brunhild's stomach from the front and performed a front suplex.

She often used this technique against her classmates in the bath. For someone with breasts, a German suplex was best, but it had to be a front suplex with Brunhild.

She snatched the girl's skinny body from the tub and water splashed into the air.

"Besides, Team Leviathan is a special unit put together to complete the Leviathan Road! So if anyone tries to stop the Leviathan Road, we'll take them on, no matter who they are!!"

"Even if that looks like refusing to admit your crimes!?"

Kazami did not care, so she held Brunhild up high and gave a casual comment.

"Sayama is always thinking about that. Even when negotiating."

"S-so you're just not going to think about it!? That's called shoving your problems onto others!"

Was it because she was not thinking that this protest had no effect on her?

"You see," began Kazami. "Everyone has their strong points and weak points and they all have their jobs. So he handles the negotiations while I handle punching people."

She took a breath and felt Brunhild's tension while holding her.

"I'm all for shoving this onto someone else. Nothing good would ever come from letting me handle the negotiations."

"Then…"

"It's simple. We will fight and Sayama will negotiate. So once we settle all the fighting, it's time for negotiating, right? And we will be the winners. Testament. If you understand that…"

Kazami quickly bent back.

"Let your brain muscles loosen up a bit!!"

A suplex dropped the target without throwing them, so they made a perfect arc with beautiful hang time.

"Huh?"

She stepped on the "banana peel" and they both fell on the "catapult".

They both instantly collided with the submerged wall.

Two dull sounds filled the bath and they moved apart and stood with much splashing.

"…! If you're going to throw me, at least do it right! You brain really is dried up!"

"Why don't you get rid of your writing once you're done with it, Miss Breast-Starved!?"

They yelled at each other and slammed their foreheads together again, but a voice reached them from the side.

"C'mon, you two. Calm down already. Other people are going to be using this place later. And it isn't good to talk about people's brains or breasts."

Ooki moved over while unsteadily parting the water.

Kazami and Brunhild clicked their tongues, stopped moving, and turned to Ooki without separating their foreheads.

Everything from Ooki's waist and up was visible above the water and the woman brushed back her wet hair.

Drops of water curved as they trailed down her and produced small ripples in the tub.

Kazami looked at Ooki's silhouette.

*…She has me beat in both shape and balance.*

Brunhild was likely thinking the same thing. Live for eternity, oh mother world tree.

Oblivious to the girls' thoughts, Ooki tilted her head.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Kazami and Brunhild looked to her face, looked down a bit as if nodding, observed for about five seconds, and exchanged a glance.

"Brunhild."

"Yes, we have a new enemy."

"Wh-where?" asked the teacher.

"Well, you see," said Kazami before taking a breath.

Next, she smiled and worked with Brunhild to throw Ooki just right of the tub's center.

●

The tatami mats were hard in winter and they felt somehow tight.

The large table holding the tea cakes was cold and hard.

The room was large, the ceiling was high, and the fluorescent light was white. It all helped draw out that hard sensation.

The red light of the stove in front of the room's western sliding screens was the only source of heat.

Three gazes looked to that light.

One sat on the hallway side of the table and the other two sat on the yard side.

The owner of the hallway-side gaze was a girl wearing a kimono and with a hair band in her black hair. Her left leg was extended and resting on a cushion because it was wrapped in bandages.

A look to her face showed the ends of her eyebrows were lowered.

"…"

She hesitated before scooting forward from the stove.

A black-haired individual in a school uniform and a boy in a suit were looking to the stove.

"What do you have to say, Shino-kun?"

The boy called her name.

Shino was unsure what he meant or how she should reply.

The individual in the school uniform turned toward the boy with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

"Sayama-kun? You're only going to trouble her if that's all you say."

"Really? I was merely asking what she thought of these tea cakes. …Shinjou-kun, what is the meaning of that fist?"

As he spoke, Sayama pushed a plate of teacakes toward Shino.

He placed a karinto on a smaller plate and set Baku on the table next to it.

"We are not going to harm you in any way. As Kouji said, you are currently a guest of the Tamiya family. And…"

Shino listened to his words.

Meanwhile, Sayama watched Baku holding the karinto between his front paws.

"Sorry, please wait a moment."

"Eh?"

She watched as Sayama looked around the room.

Shinjou also looked to him and tilted her head, so he had to be acting on something only he had noticed. Currently, he was slowly looking across the ceiling.

"It looks like the room has been cleared."

"Eh? Yes, Kouji arranged for everyone to leave."

Sayama stepped on a tatami mat.

The edge of the mat shot up and a long spear rose up.

Shino watched in confusion as Sayama grabbed the spear.

“I used to play ‘whac-a-creep’ against my grandfather. When that old man was about to lose, he would try stabbing me with the spear, so I would throw him into the gator pond.”

As he spoke, he suddenly moved.

“There.”

He stabbed the entire spear tip into the ceiling.

It audibly pierced the wood, Shino watched with her mouth hanging blankly open, and Shinjou watched with a troubled smile.

“Sayama-kun, what if someone really was peeping and you hit them?”

“The torso is eight points, the head is ten, the limbs are five, and the vitals are twenty, Shinjou-kun.”

He pulled out the spear and looked at the tip.

“There’s nothing on it, Sayama-kun.”

“Look more closely. Someone has wiped off the blade. This was the work of a true ninja.”

Sayama sounded impressed, nodded thrice, and stabbed the blade back into the ceiling for a surprise attack.

“Eeeeeeek!” shouted the ceiling. “I was too slow and gave him five points!!”

Unsatisfied with only five points, Sayama immediately stabbed a different point in the ceiling. Several shouts and many footsteps or sounds of crawling fled above the ceiling.

“Brother! Brother! The young master’s serious! Spying here is no game!”

“Ha ha ha. Don’t be silly. Don’t they say to treat your games like work and your work like a game!?”

“Wow, you’re so smart, brother! That means you could die from a game, doesn’t- poh!?”

The end of the sentence changed once Sayama made another stab.

“Ha ha ha ha,” he said. “Looks like we have a large audience tonight!”

“Ah wah wah wah wah! You’re gonna stab me! Stop! You’re gonna stab me! Stop! Stop stabbing! St-st-st-stop-st-st-stab-st-st-st- wait!”

“Ahhh! He got Shingo!! Pwah!!”

“Ahhh, Takeshi too!? He’s up to 28 points! Pwaaah!!”

Sayama pursued the fleeing and screaming footsteps while continuing to stab. He finally ran to a sliding screen.

“Excuse me, you two. I will be right back after stabbing some people away. …Shinjou-kun, you speak in my stead. You will want to know the same things I do.”

He opened the screen with his foot and ran down the hallway, stabbing the ceiling all the while.

Shino faced forward while listening to the screams and frantic voices muffled by the ceiling.

She realized Shinjou had the exact same expression on her face.

However, Shinjou recovered more quickly.

Her eyes came into focus and her mind returned to the real world.

Drawn in by that, Shino also recovered.

“Ah.”

Her mind came back and she watched Shinjou sigh and hang her head.

As if to calm herself, Shinjou bit into a yatsuhashi and took a sip of tea.

She then looked up and faced Shino with little strength in her eyebrows.

“Um, sorry about that. I really don’t understand the strange customs of this house.”

The sounds of stabbing and running grew more distant in the hallway behind Shino.

“Now, where should we start speaking? For both our sakes.”

# Chapter 7

## “Surprise Guest”

You can jump in with a single step
Up ahead is darkness or a hole
But there is no brightness if you escape

●

Shinjou watched Shino in the slightly chilly air of a large room.

They had already introduced themselves and Shinjou had said she was leaving that night to complete the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear and to pursue Shinjou Yukio's past to learn about the destruction of Top-Gear.

On the other hand, Shino had not said much.

She had said she was from Top-Gear, she had given the surname Tamiya, and she had informed Shinjou that the Tamiya family had taken her in when she was injured on the night of the attack. Shinjou had a single thought based on that.

"Are you the…real version of a Tamiya here? Since the sex is reversed, are you Kouji?"

Shino quickly shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. My parents might have been, but I was an only child. …I've heard that there were a lot of people in Top-Gear that did not have a counterpart here."

"I see," said Shinjou while breathing a silent sigh of relief.

*…I don't like thinking about people as real or fake.*

She gave a small nod to herself and Shino raised her head to look at her.

"Um, what happened to the Army? I got separated when we were retreating."

"The Army… Well, Hajji was captured as its representative."

"…"

Shino fell silent and her expression stiffened, but Shinjou did not soften her words. She simply spoke the truth.

"There has been no announcement of the Army being remade, so it's thought to have been destroyed."

"Then my sister and the others are…?"

"Your sister?"

Shino's shoulders shook a bit and she brought a hand to her mouth.

"I mean Mikoku. She, Hajji, and I lived like a family."

"I see. Well, she wasn't captured."

Shinjou hesitated, but decided to tell her.

"The person named Tatsumi, the mechanical dragon named Alex,

and about…fifty other people weren't captured either."

Shino's eyes opened wide, but after a moment, her expression softened.

She gave a look of relief but then closed her eyes.

Shinjou understood. Shino had realized those others were not going to stop resisting.

After muttering something – a name – under her breath, Shino raised her chin and opened her eyes to look at Shinjou.

"Then what is it you want to ask me? I have to give you some information in exchange for what you just gave me."

"Yes. I would be grateful if you did."

Shinjou nodded and thought of a few topics.

*…Does she know about my parents?*

She of course wanted to know about her mother, but she also wondered what her Top-Gear father was like. And what had happened to them?

She also thought about asking what her life in Top-Gear had been like, but…

*…That's what we're about to go investigate.*

So she asked something else.

"Is what Hajji said during the Army's attack true?"

The response she got was not the one she expected.

"You really don't remember your life in Osaka?"

That question gave Shinjou her answer.

"So it is true."

"Yes."

Shino averted her gaze a bit downwards, but there was no darkness in her expression. She looked somehow nostalgic as she made a gesture like holding something in her hand.

"A concept creation facility was made in Osaka. It was placed near where Babel is in Low-Gear to act as its pair. After that, Japanese UCAT and the people connected to it moved to Osaka."

"I…see."

She somehow managed to accept this information that she had known but could not remember.

But then Shino asked a sudden question.

"Are you going to report that I'm here?"

Shinjou suddenly realized the significance of Shino being here.

…*Oh.*

It had been so sudden that she had overlooked it, but it was an extremely obvious thing.

"Before I answer…can you tell me why you're here? You had to have known you would run into us."

Her leg was apparently injured, but she could always use her crutch to escape. Shinjou felt it would have been better for her to meet up with the remnants of the Army before she had been found.

"If it was to heal your leg, wouldn't it have been faster to go to UCAT or meet up with the others from the Army? Why did you stay here?"

Shino brought a hand to her mouth, but she finally shook her head and took in a breath.

"For some reason…I just don't feel like going anywhere. I do think I should go somewhere, though."

And…

"I don't really know if I should be here in the first place. … They're letting me stay, but I feel like this isn't where I should be or like I don't belong anywhere. …I just feel like I'm intruding."

Hearing that, Shinjou's previous doubt grew in her heart.

…*What is this?*

"Um? We happened to learn you're here, but you can walk, even if not well. So why don't you want to meet up with the remnants of the Army? And…"

Shinjou asked about the contradiction Shino held.

"You're hiding from the remnants of the Army here and yet you're not sure if you belong here. Why do you think that? And in that case…where *do* you belong?"

●

Shino looked to the girl who had asked her that question.

As she did, she belatedly thought about it.

…*What* is *my answer?*

The Tamiya family was looking after her. Kouji had taken her in because he thought she "had her reasons".

There were several others who had been taken in for similar reasons.

She thought it was a nice house. It had a nice atmosphere and it

had nice people.

She heard a stabbing spear and a commotion in the distance, but she was grateful that everyone was always so lively.

In Top-Gear, she had once lived in a large house much like this one.

She could not walk properly, but she felt perfectly comfortable under the Tamiya family's care.

*…So why do I feel bad for staying here?*

To collect her thoughts, she asked a question.

"Do I want to return to the Army? Or do I not?"

"That's not really something I can answer for you."

Shinjou brought a finger to her mouth and hung her head a little.

"But," she muttered as if checking on and gathering her own thoughts.

First, she raised a single finger toward Shino.

"You're here alone, right?"

Shino nodded and Shinjou raised a second finger.

"You were happy to learn that the people of the Army were safe and that some of them had not been found."

She raised a third finger.

"But you don't want to go meet up with either group."

A fourth finger.

"And you feel guilty for staying here."

She lowered her hand, lightly slapped her knee, and asked a question as if to herself.

"What does it mean?"

"What…do you mean by that?"

Shinjou nodded, looked up, and looked to Shino with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

After a shout in the distance, she frowned.

"This is a hard house to have a serious discussion in. Was the one in Top-Gear the same?"

"N-no. That's unique to this one."

"I see."

Shinjou nodded and looked Shino in the eye again. This time, she tilted her head a bit.

"Um? I don't entirely understand, but it seems to me that…well… you want to be with the Army, but you don't want the Army to

continue.”

And…

“It’s almost like you reluctantly graduated from the Army during that attack.”

Shino had never graduated from anything before, but it helped her understand the state of her heart.

*…I…*

She recalled a moment in the past.

It was the moment when she had parted ways with the Army and had been alone.

A month and a half ago, she had run through the mountains after the Army had lost.

At the time, she had tried to stay by Mikoku’s side, but when it came to a fight…

*…I was kept from fighting.*

After escaping, Mikoku and the others would likely continue fighting in some form.

So if she did end up meeting Mikoku again, she would only be rejected once more.

After all, Mikoku would continue rejecting her as long as she was near the fighting.

*…Then why?*

She had a question.

*…If she was only going to reject me in the end, why did she stay with me for so long?*

She did not know. There was no way she could know. It all came down to Mikoku’s heart.

But if she did not want to be separated from Mikoku, she had to remain with the Army.

Yet if Mikoku would find some reason to reject her…

“I should try to keep my distance.”

*…That’s why I can’t leave even though I’m not sure I should be here.*

She was hiding her identity as a Top-Gear human and having the enemy protect her.

That brought on the guilt of deceiving Kouji, Ryouko, and the others, but…

“…”

She had a single reason for choosing that option.

*…It's so difficult when I'm near her.*

She would be thrust away without being told why.

She would receive no answer even if she asked why.

*…So I decided to stay away on my own.*

"But I'm not determined enough for that, so I start hesitating again."

As soon as she muttered those words, a sudden sound of impact reached her ears from behind.

●

"What?"

Shino reflexively stood up and looked behind her.

She saw something strange growing from the plaster wall there.

It was the tip of a spear.

The sharp and shining blade was accompanied by a voice coming from the wall.

"Tapwaaaah!"

She heard a scream and a series of stabbing sounds as the blade quickly moved in and out of the wall.

"Owwww, ow, ow, ow, owwwwpaaaah!! 7-hit combo!!"

"Eeeek! Onji was taken out in midair! Retreat! Retreat!"

After more shouts and fleeing footsteps in the wall, Ryouko's voice reached the room.

"Okay, three more minutes until the time limit. …Wah! Don't run this way!!"

"Heh heh heh. Are you going to run? But with three whole minutes to go, I can easily reach a high score!"

After a single footstep out in the hallway, Shinjou spoke from behind Shino.

"Sayama-kun! Um…"

Before she could say any more, a voice answered. And it had clearly heard what Shino had said.

"Keeping your distance because you are not sure where you belong takes quite a bit of determination. And yet even the world's air is blushing and panting as if it floats around you in the hopes that you will breath it in."

"Sayama-kun, that air surrounds us too, you know?"

“Calm down, Shinjou-kun. What surrounds the two of us is a much denser gas.”

“Oxyg-insanity?”

“Heh heh heh. It is not often you make puns, Shinjou-kun. Tanaka-kun, bring out all of the cushions. Tanaka-kuuun.”

“Abrbah!”

“Ahhh, Tanaka!! He got a critical hit on Tanaka!! Now he can’t carry the cushions!!”

Ignoring the excited voices, Shinjou scratched at her head and spoke to Sayama through the wall.

“Um, Sayama-kun? I don’t think Shino-san wants to go to UCAT either.”

“I see.”

Shino felt her pulse race at those two words.

It was clear that he was about to give his answer.

So she tried to say something. It did not matter what as long as it bought her some time.

But before she could, Sayama’s voice reached her through the wall.

“That is fine.”

She swallowed her words and fell silent, but he continued regardless.

“She is no longer a part of the Army.”

●

Shinjou stood and looked back and forth between the wall and Shino.

She was aware she was frowning.

“She isn’t part of the Army?”

“Then can you tell me why she has not used her thought coercion concept?”

Shinjou finally recalled Shino could make people do what she said.

*…That power would probably help handle Sayama-kun.*

She was certain her very first command for him would be “calm down”.

But why had Shino not used that power?

“You don’t mean…”

Shino was hanging her head in resignation and Shinjou looked to

the two chains hanging from the girl's neck.

One of them held a red cloisonné pendant.

The other held a blue stone pendant.

But the blue one had changed.

"It's broken?"

Shino gave a small nod and held up the small blue stone to show the white crack through it.

"During our retreat, I was hit by a powerful cutting concept. I deflected the attack by ordering it to be 'rejected', but the concepts seemed to be a bad match. Now my power is sealed and I can't use it. It let me enter concept spaces before, but I'm not even sure I can do that now that it's broken."

Shinjou waited a moment after Shino finished.

She took the time to think about what this meant.

"In other words…you have no ability to fight, you won't meet up with the remnants of the Army, and you won't move from here? And without a Low-Gear counterpart, you have no hated enemy?"

She was powerless, she could not move, she had no foe, and she did not wish to fight.

That did indeed mean she was not part of the Army. She was no different from an injured person of this world.

From a physical perspective, they were no different from Low-Gear humans.

They were only different in that they were part of the Army and were residents of Top-Gear.

*…Then which are you?*

Shinjou just about asked that, but she swallowed the words.

She had once fallen into a similar state of mind.

She had wondered which side she should be with and which side she should be on.

*…She's the same.*

With that understanding, Shinjou sat back down.

She looked straight at Shino who tilted her head and lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

Shinjou chose her words carefully while playing with the hair falling onto her cheek.

"Then how about this? Once you decide which side to be on, we will use that to decide who you are."

“B-but you two don’t have the authority to-…”

Sayama’s voice answered her from beyond the wall.

“No, we do not. But what proof do we have that you are truly that girl from the Army?”

Shino looked surprised and straightened her back.

“You do not have a ghost dog and it is impossible to genetically determine you are a ‘real human’ of Top-Gear when you have no Low-Gear counterpart. You could be someone else entirely who just so happens to be the spitting image of that Army girl. The Army’s remnants may have led you here to trick us.”

“But that isn’t-…!”

“Twarah!!”

“Eeek! He got Tetsu! He even got Tetsu!!”

Before Shino could say anything more, Sayama’s footsteps moved away with sounds of stabbing.

Shinjou listened while looking back to Shino.

“Um,” she began while placing a hand on her chest and breathing in. “We may not know if you are from the Army or not, but I would like to ask you one thing.”

“What is it? …I don’t really want to tell you anything that would harm the others, though.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” agreed Shinjou.

Shino still cared about the Army and Top-Gear.

At the same time, she cared about the peace this world had gained from not knowing about the Concept War.

*…How will this turn out?*

Unlike Shinjou, Shino still remembered Top-Gear, so what would she end up doing?

With that in mind, Shinjou formed her words.

“Today, we’re leaving for Kansai. We have a lot of work to do there and I think we’re going to stop by Sakai on the way back. So if possible, can you tell me just one thing? I think my mom must have lived in Top-Gear’s Osaka, but where exactly did she live?”

“Well…”

Shino’s voice was scratchy, but she answered.

“At first, it was an orphanage in Sakai.”

Shinjou engraved the girl’s next words into her heart.

“After that, your mother lived in the concept creation facility built

in Top-Gear."

"In the concept creation facility?"

Shino looked her in the eye.

Her black eyes seemed to peer deep into her own.

"Yes. The giant facility was built to save the peoples of all Gears. It was called Noah."

●

A river flowed through the night.

It had a white cement embankment, but the private road above had no lights.

This was the Aki River that flowed east to west through south Akigawa.

The only light came from the amusement park on the other side of the river.

"It is strange that an amusement park in Akigawa is known as Hachioji Summerland."

A girl muttered to herself while facing that light halfway up the embankment on the private road side.

The girl lying on the embankment wore a black suit.

It was Mikoku.

A large white dog sat next to her.

The two of them looked to the lights of the amusement park and other external lights across the river.

The east end of the amusement park contained a one hundred meter white indoor pool building. The west end contained a roller coaster and an outdoor pool.

During this season, the outdoor pool was used for a nighttime skating rink.

"They probably cannot see us from over there," muttered Mikoku and the dog barked quietly next to her.

She glanced over at the dog accusingly.

"Shiro, wouldn't you rather be with Shino?"

Shiro did not answer and simply stared at the light.

He did not even move, so Mikoku brought a hand to his throat.

*...Come to think of it, I have never done this before.*

She could be bolder with no one else around. *I really am a coward,* she thought.

“O-okay. It is time for a tickle attack.”

The dog brought her outstretched hand deep into its mouth and gently bit her.

“Ahhh!”

He released her hand as soon as she cried out, but he immediately went back to ignoring her.

Seeing that, she sighed, crossed her arms behind her head, and thought about one thing.

*…Shiro is not searching for Shino because Shino is trying to avoid me.*

And she had yet to find Shino.

The members of the Army had safe houses and emergency storage areas around Kantou, but Shino’s belongings had not been moved.

Mikoku had tried bringing Shiro around, but the dog had not reacted to anything.

*Most likely,* she qualified to herself. *Shiro has picked up on what Shino is thinking.*

*He must want to search for her too, but she is trying to keep her distance right now.*

She did not know why, but Shiro showed no sign of searching for Shino and as far as she was concerned…

“That is exactly what I want.”

This meant Shino would no longer be involved with anything dangerous. If Shino was avoiding the Army, it meant she agreed with that.

“Isn’t that right, Shiro? …Ahhh!”

Shiro gently bit her and let go again and Mikoku could see through him much more than before.

During their retreat three weeks before, the man known as “the rapist” had attacked and destroyed Mikoku’s body.

The mountain had collapsed, she had been washed into a river, and she had woken up three days later in a rocky area.

The locations prepared for regrouping had already been abandoned by that point.

The house they had lived in with Hajji had been under surveillance, as was the factory.

This had left Mikoku separated from the rest of the Army and

without Shino.

Staying in Akigawa brought a risk of being found by UCAT, but she was still there because it seemed the best way to search out the rest of the Army.

But she had yet to find them or even any trace of them. The only thing she had found was Shiro who had been next to her when she had woken up in that rocky area. However, the dog had been growing thinner ever since.

Shino's philosopher's stone created a synchronization of minds more than it did control minds. It could even gather up traces of thought, but due to Shino's personality, it would create embodiments of what could be called dog ghosts.

Shiro was the strongest of those and he would continue to exist as long as Shino's philosopher's stone remained.

But now, he was beginning to vanish.

*…Was her philosopher's stone destroyed or abandoned?*

*It's hard to say,* she groaned to herself while sitting up.

*…That was ten years ago…*

During the battle that destroyed Top-Gear, Shino had been given that philosopher's stone by her philosopher's stone developer parents.

It had been inside a facility known as Noah. The negative concepts had been wreaking havoc on the world and the inside of Noah had been no different. Shino had been given the stone as a protective charm. She had been given nothing more, not even words, before she had been sent outside Noah and toward the gate opened to Low-Gear.

Mikoku also remembered being sent away by her parents and the automaton that managed Noah.

When she had stepped outside, the world had already been destroyed and Noah had been surrounded by Low-Gear's UCAT. The Top-Gear residents of Top-Gear's UCAT had left the children inside Noah with Hajji who had temporarily withdrawn. After that, most of the adults had gone back out to fight.

According to them, they had to because it was a battle between Top-Gear and Low-Gear.

The children had then evacuated to Low-Gear.

Mikoku thought she knew why Hajji was so hostile to Low-Gear.

*…Is it because he was unable to fight to the end back then?*

She had a similar feeling inside herself.

A month and a half ago, her own inexperience had prevented her from fulfilling her job to the end.

"What is this regret?" she muttered.

Shiro turned toward her and she once more noted how she could see through him.

*…And if Shino's philosopher's stone really is losing its power…*

That would be a first for the girl.

That stone had been her final line of defense when setting foot in this strange world that seemed so very similar to the world she knew.

She had never been in Low-Gear without the stone.

*…But if she no longer has it…*

Mikoku held her breath as she continued on that train of thought, but…

"…"

She got up.

Shiro quickly turned toward her again and she tried to pat his head.

"Ahhh! Calm down, Shiro. …At any rate, Shino is a smart girl. I do not know where she is living, but she will no longer need us once she gets used to it."

The way she hung her head and spoke made it look like she was trying to convince herself of that.

"That means I am the only one that is alone."

*I do not like the sound of that now that I have no one else,* she thought.

The only piece of hope was that Shino was apparently with good people. Shiro would have done something if she was in danger.

So…

*…This is my problem and only my problem.*

In the near future, they were sure to oppose the world in some way. Tatsumi had Alex and the others had their own people to worry about, but…

*…I am alone.*

She had pushed away the person she cared about most.

Now that she had made an enemy of this world, she would never

have anyone to care for again.

"All I can be is alone."

Suddenly, her lowered gaze caught sight of a light.

It was a straight line of light visible between her eyes and the philosopher's stone in her throat.

The light was reflected off of the metal blade sticking through the back of her neck and out the front.

●

"Eh?"

Mikoku's voice did not form proper words.

Her eyes showed her that a thick-bladed knife was sticking through her neck from behind while muffled breathing and bubbling blood escaped her neck.

"…!"

So she clenched her teeth and swallowed the blood. Whatever this was, letting out a cry of pain would only inform the attacker of her situation, so she breathed in through her nose.

"…"

*Calm down,* she told herself while reaching behind her with her right hand and grabbing the knife handle.

She held her head in place with her left hand and pulled out the knife.

*…Kh.*

She felt something cold leaving her neck where she normally breathed and swallowed.

She resisted the urge to vomit and removed the blade.

Other than what spilled out from removing the blade, no blood left her.

She had pulled it out straight enough for the healing to begin immediately.

That was when she realized how skilled the thrower had been.

She sensed no one on the embankment behind her.

That meant they had thrown the knife in a parabolic arc from the other side of the embankment.

Not many people could accomplish that in a blind throw. Especially with enough force to stab in so deeply.

"It can't be."

A name came to mind and she just about spoke it aloud, but she stopped when she noticed something else.

The knife she held had something written on it with magic marker.

One side of the thick, brown leather handle had a message.

“Don’t let your guard down. Enemies. Tomorrow in Sakai, announce our intentions as leader.”

The letter folded on the opposite side was held on with a rubber band.

As soon as she read the writing, Mikoku was convinced of who had thrown the knife.

*…Tatsumi!?*

It was a rough method of telling her to not let her guard down and that the enemy was coming. Also…

*…As leader!? What does that mean!?*

No, she knew the answer to that.

She was being told to take Hajji’s place.

She thought it was ridiculous, but she also knew what Tatsumi was trying to say. Now that Hajji was a prisoner, the Army had no leader. That meant the Army would vanish and they would become the forces of Top-Gear.

They would need a leader, but Alex was restricted by his mechanical dragon body, Tatsumi was not the leadership type, and Shino was missing.

That process-of-elimination answer angered Mikoku. And…

*…Tomorrow in Sakai, announce our intentions?*

Information on Shinjou’s mother was in Sakai, so would she go there? But…

“I am supposed to decide everyone’s fate!? What is the meaning of this!?”

Just as she began to tremble in fear because of her own inexperience, she heard a sudden sound from the top of the embankment behind her. It was the sound of a small rock being kicked and Tatsumi would never make a sound like that as she approached.

She did not even need to think what this meant as she got up from the embankment.

She moved forward, toward the river.

"Shiro!"

As she gave that bloody shout, she decided she was thinking too much.

She has thinking too much about Shino, about the regret brought on by her inexperience a month and a half before, and about her own loneliness.

It was all weighing on her mind so heavily that she had allowed Tatsumi's throw to reach her.

She was sure Tatsumi would tell her she would normally have noticed the knife.

But even if she could guess how someone else would warn her, she could not find a decent answer.

She only knew two things.

First, she had let her guard down due to her inexperience.

And second…

*…Sayama is on the move!*

The Army and Hajji had shaken them so much, the Gear reservations had to be reacting, and the foreign UCATs would never stay silent.

And yet…

"…"

Mikoku dove into the winter river to escape.

As she did so, she realized she may have nowhere left to run.

●

Two splashes could be heard from the top of the embankment.

Four pairs of hard shoes could be heard shortly thereafter.

Four well-built people in suits stood on the unlit asphalt at the top of the embankment.

Three were men and one was a woman. One had blond hair, two had black hair, and one had brown hair.

Their eyes were covered by the visor-like objects they wore.

The black-haired man who seemed to be their leader spoke into a cellphone.

He spoke in English.

"They escaped. The philosopher's stone reading is moving away through the river. We will continue to the other…no, we cannot split our personnel. …Testament. Then we will continue with our normal

guard duties.”

The black-haired man ended the call.

The splashing sounds had already vanished from the black river surface.

A few seconds later, he brought his right hand to his visor.

“Target lost.”

He spoke quietly and deactivated a few switches on the side of the visor.

“Not being able to act publicly is difficult. There are a lot of people we must covertly protect, so we can’t pursue when we do find a target. …This is the most stressful situation. It’s a shame. I was born in Texas, so I love gun battles.”

“Calm down,” said the brown-haired woman next to him. “I’m sure Colonel Odor wants to take action more than anyone else, but he’s stuck negotiating with our home country below Yokota. And you know how much he hates deskwork.”

“But if he went to the meeting in the major’s place, he would probably physically crush the representatives of the other UCATs. I can almost hear him saying ‘They’re pissing me off! They’re pissing me off, Roger!’ The entire meeting room would be flattened.”

“That’s for sure,” said the two men behind her with bitter smiles.

But the woman only shrugged.

“But that’s what he normally does. Why *isn’t* he doing that? If he used the full authority and dignity of the United States, most of the countries in that meeting would have no choice but to go along with it.”

The black-haired man removed his visor, folded it up, and put it in his pocket.

He then turned around and started toward the black car stopped on the edge of the embankment.

After the first step, he spoke.

“Then can you answer this? Who was it that defeated Black Sun?”

“———”

He heard a gasp behind him and kicked a small piece of loose asphalt as he walked.

“I was there at the Chofu airport. I saw it destroy those vehicles and my comrades. What we had destroyed turned out not to be Black Sun and we allowed the real one into our airspace. But,” he

said. “Some people tried to understand Black Sun and received the Concept Core as a sign of apology.”

He let out a bitter laugh.

“What we and the colonel are doing is making sure those people do not have their power sealed away. The other Gears are trying to pick a fight with them right now, but I at least know that those people are the only ones who can fight them. I’m sure the colonel and the major know as well. And we know that letting them fight is the fastest answer.”

“But the other UCATs don’t know that and are trying to interfere, aren’t they?”

“Testament,” replied the blond man in the back.

He tapped the shoulder of the man next to him and also began walking toward the car.

“Members of a few different UCATs have shown up at or near Team Leviathan residences about thirty times in the past two weeks. We’re counting perverts, arsonists, and UCAT Director Ooshiro separately, but it seems we’re still doing quite a bit to maintain the peace of this country.”

“It looks like we can spread freedom and peace on the household level as well. We will continue to police every UCAT by keeping an eye on the other ones and we will report any hostile actions from the other Gears. This is an important job…and we sometimes catch people like that in our net.”

“That was Toda Mikoku, the girl with an immortality philosopher’s stone, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” answered the man walking in front. “But it isn’t immortality. It’s high-speed regeneration and it has a flaw. The regeneration is not instantaneous and it relies on the stone, so the regeneration stops if the stone is destroyed. In other words, if you blow her to bits with an explosive and then destroy the stone before she can fully regenerate, she will die. There’s nothing she can do about it,” he added. “Also, the Army spoke about the truth of Top-Gear, but they forgot two things. First, we are now living in the present. And second, they failed to steal even one of the Concept Cores. Everything they mentioned is nothing but the past and they have nothing to bring to the negotiating table. So…”

He suddenly trailed off.

His footsteps stopped, too.

He had stopped seven meters from the car on the end of the embankment.

The embankment lowered to the left and connected to the road running alongside the river.

He looked to the streetlights on that road and silently looked back.

He saw someone standing on the asphalt.

This was not any of his three companions.

A single new person stood there.

It was a girl with long hair who wore a combat coat.

There had been no sign of her previously.

She was five meters away and he had not noticed until she was that close.

It had likely been the same for his companions. Three people were collapsed and unmoving along the path she had taken thus far.

After noting that they seemed to have simply collapsed as they walked, he began to move.

He pulled a submachine gun from his coat.

He turned the short suppressor toward her and muffled gunshots shook the air.

“Nagata Tatsumi!!”

A cold smile charged toward him in response.

“Yes. That is the name I am going by now.”

●

The man saw Tatsumi slip below his arm.

She had moved under the arm he was using to hold the gun forward.

Her flowing black hair wrapped in the wind and the sword she drew from her back produced the color silver.

Her movements looked relaxed, but they were lightning fast.

“Sorry, but I need to you to stay still for a bit.”

After drawing the sword, her left elbow sprang up.

The elbow knocked up his right arm which held the gun.

He saw his arm bend a little and then fully bend as if releasing its strength.

A moment later, Tatsumi’s blade raced forward and split the

submachine gun in two.

However, the man could still move.

He pulled back his left hand and tried to draw the combat knife on his left hip.

“Is this what you’re looking for?”

Tatsumi tilted her head as she asked and she held a knife in her right hand.

She gently pushed on the back of the knife and drove the entire blade into his chest just below the right collarbone.

“———”

As soon as he gave a cry of pain, he saw something.

Tatsumi pulled back the silver line and it seemed to multiply several times over.

The illusion was caused by a series of jabs too quick for his eyes to fully capture.

They all hit.

The sound was as light as paper being struck, but the strikes all penetrated to the other side of his limbs or torso.

His bones broke, his tendons were pierced, and he began to collapse back onto the asphalt.

“Kh…”

“You can still speak?”

She reached her hand out toward his chest as he fell.

Just as he wondered what she was going to do, she grabbed the handle of the knife stabbed there.

“I’ll remove that for you.”

She used his falling motion to pull out the knife.

A gouging sensation filled the right half of his body from behind.

“…!!”

He swallowed the cry of pain and instead looked up to the moon and listened to Tatsumi’s voice.

“Don’t make fun of Mikoku too much, okay? If she really was useless, I wouldn’t bother teaching her anything. With Shino gone and nowhere to run, this is the perfect chance to train herself. And…”

He heard a bitter laugh.

“Who were you in charge of protecting? If you remember that, you should understand that we haven’t given up just yet. Yes, since

Mikoku hasn't pulled herself together yet, we need to set the stage for her."

He fell onto his back.

The intense pain in the right of his chest sent his mind into darkness, but he clearly heard Tatsumi's voice just before it did.

"We will set the stage so Top-Gear can correct the Leviathan Road. …I hope you're looking forward to it."

●

A certain large space was surrounded by books.

That room on the first floor of Taka-Akita Academy's Second Year General Education School Building was known as the Kinugasa Library.

It was stepped with the center at the lowest point, countless bookcases filled it like a forest, and the scene outside the nearly covered windows was dark.

The wall clock said it was nine at night, so the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were the only illumination.

The artificial lights produced shadows from the lines of bookcases and the entire library was somewhat covered in shadow.

The only area free of shadow was the highest point of the stepped floor where there were no bookcases.

That meant the counter by the entrance and the area in front of the preparation room in the back.

Two people stood in front of the unlit preparation room and one stood within it.

One of those outside was a girl with long blonde hair who was leaning against the wall.

The other was a girl with short blonde hair who was peering inside the dark room.

The one inside was the short-haired girl that the one blonde girl was peering in at.

That blonde girl spoke to the girl who wore a track suit and searched along the room's wall.

"U-um, Kazami? Are you okay?"

"Eh? I'm fine, Heo. They just store stuff in here, so I won't get in trouble for being in here. Besides, the Kinugasa Library isn't being used for the year end festival yet."

“No, Kazami. …I meant about the battle.”

Hearing that, the girl with long blonde hair moved from the wall. She spoke to Kazami who was searching for the light switch in the dark room.

“You’re not hurt?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.”

With a bitter smile, Kazami found the switch and pressed it.

A quiet flashing sound came from the ceiling and a brownish light turned on.

“Now, then,” said Kazami below that light. “This is a lot of books. The small room is packed full of them.”

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I’m not sure. But you heard what Sayama and Shinjou called ahead about, right? There should be a ‘Study’ inside the Kinugasa Library.”

Kazami knew Sayama had gone to the Tamiya house and she knew why.

*…He’s searching for his mother’s past.*

She understood the past still gave him pain, but she now knew he was stepping forward without fearing that pain.

*…In that case…*

“I need to help him out.”

Mikage tilted her head at that, but Kazami simply smiled and changed the subject.

“Let’s get this cleaned up while the guys are out buying snacks and drinks. …I think the big pile of books in the center is actually because of a work table below them.”

Hearing that, Heo’s shoulders trembled below her flight jacket and school uniform.

“Is this the Study?”

“Hm? No. It’s the preparation room.”

“Then…”

Heo looked doubtful and Mikage expressionlessly tilted her head, so Kazami nodded.

“I think this is the entrance to the Study.”

“B-but there’s nothing here. Even in the back, there’s only bookcases.”

*Oh, that’s right,* thought Kazami. *Heo and Mikage don’t know the*

*library that well. If they did, there's one thing they would have noticed.*

So she looked to the wall clock.

It was just before 9:00 PM and there was no sign of Siegfried at the counter.

"Did you know that Siegfried the librarian plays the piano in the second floor music room at a set time every day and whenever he has some spare time?"

Even as she spoke, the music reached them.

It was Silent Night.

The piano sounded almost serene.

The ends of Heo's eyebrows lowered as she listened to the loud yet calm music.

"I can hear it, but what about it? Mikage, you can hear it too, right?"

"Nn."

Heo looked uneasy and Mikage tilted her head, but Kazami was satisfied.

"That's right." She nodded. "You can hear it. …Now, come here."

Kazami grabbed the two girls' shoulders and left the room.

After taking a few steps, they corrected their posture to walk alongside her.

"U-um, Kazami?"

She took a few more steps without answering and moved down one level of the stepped floor.

Kazami stepped down with Heo after watching Mikage time her step down a bit ahead of the other two.

After a few more steps, it became clear what Kazami was getting at.

Heo and Mikage did not take their next step with Kazami.

They came to a stop, so Kazami did the same.

She looked to either side. She saw Mikage expressionlessly lower her head on the right and Heo open her eyes wide on the left. They were both speechless, so she spoke up in triumphant laugh.

"Heh heh. What's the matter, you two? Why did you stop?"

"Nn."

Mikage nodded and Heo hesitated before slowly speaking.

"The music…went away."

“Right,” said Kazami as she let go of the girls’ shoulders.

She took a step forward, turned around to face their surprised and confused faces, and breathed in.

“I just now found the answer to one of this school’s mysteries.”

She looked up to the ceiling. Beyond the white ceiling panels and fluorescent lights was the music room.

“The music room above here is fully soundproofed. You can’t hear anything from inside even in the hallway right outside it. Above that is the art room. …So why do the sounds of those two floors reach the preparation room separately?”

“Separately?”

“Yes.” She nodded and looked the other two in the eye. “When Brunhild was keeping her bird in the art room, we heard it chirping from the preparation room. However, the sounds from the music room can’t be heard in the art room. Siegfried suggested it’s due to the sounds resonating with the walls, but…”

She looked toward the preparation room as she continued.

“What if there’s a hidden room back there? What if it’s not resonating with the walls? What if the hidden room’s air conditioning travels through the art room and music room’s walls separately, so the sounds arrive separately as well?”

“…”

Heo and Mikage looked surprised, but Kazami only felt more satisfaction.

“Now,” she said with a clap of her hands.

The sound reverberated through the library and she lifted her eyebrows in a smile.

“Let’s clean this up. At least enough to reach the work table and bookcases in the back. …The wall beyond those bookcases seems suspicious, doesn’t it?”

# Chapter 8

## “The World’s Entrance”

Where do we go from here?
Where did we come from to get here?

●

Even after clearing out the books, the room was still small.

The wood floor did not even cover ten square meters. It had the door-less entrance to the front and the bookcases in the back.

The scarlet light on the ceiling filled the room which smelled of damp dust.

“There sure were a lot of books in here.”

Those words came from one of the eight people inside the room.

It was Shinjou.

She and the others were not looking to the central work desk or the snacks and drinks sitting on it.

They were focused on the bookcases and the books filling them.

There were four of them beyond the piles of old books that remained on the floor.

The bookcases reached the ceiling. The two on the far left and right were placed farther forward while the two placed between them were kept in the far back.

“That’s clearly a double-layer bookcase.”

Kazami rolled up her track suit’s sleeves and Shinjou felt the girl had spoken for everyone there.

There were no rails on the floor for the bookcases to move along, but according to Sayama…

“The two in the front are likely fixed in place, but if the back two have rails to slide to the side – that is, between the front bookcases and the wall – then those back bookcases are effectively doors. In other words, there is a hidden room or a concept space behind them.”

He gave a troubled smile.

“Shinjou-kun and I are about to leave for 8th’s Leviathan Road and to search for her mother’s past in relation to Top-Gear’s destruction, but I never expected to begin a treasure hunt for this ‘Study’ before we left.”

Shinjou smiled a bit and nodded at his words.

“Well, we already told them about Noah and your mother, so let’s do what we can before we have to leave for the train.”

When she had arrived with Sayama earlier, most of the books on the preparation room’s floor had already been removed.

They had all ignored the snacks laid out on the work desk, discussed how to move the bookcases, and discussed the information Shinjou and Sayama brought from the Tamiya house.

The front and back bookcases were both filled with books, but the top left of the left one in the back had an open space.

An old globe had been placed there.

They had learned three other things in their investigation.

There was no switch hidden in the back of the bookcases.

When they tapped on the back panel, it made a light sound that indicated there was empty space beyond it.

And…

"We can't break through it even though it's made of wood."

It had been Izumo who had discovered the bookcases and the surrounding wall were protected by a concept.

After returning from the hospital and hearing Kazami had fought a battle, he had tried to reach inside her track suit to make sure she was not injured.

He had subsequently crashed into the bookcase, but he had bounced off without it breaking or even creaking.

However, that had not improved the situation.

Sayama frowned and crossed his arms next to Shinjou, Harakawa and Heo stood by the wall, Hiba and Mikage leaned against the left and right bookcases, and Kazami and Izumo gathered up the remaining books on the floor.

Shinjou groaned in thought as she observed the contents of the bookcases.

"This is a strange mixture of books. I wonder why."

"Have you figured something out, Shinjou-kun?"

"No, um…"

She hesitated and looked around.

The others turned toward her and her shoulders shrank down.

"Well, I'm probably way off base here, but…"

She tried asking the question that had occurred to her when she noticed the strange mixture of books.

"These books seem almost random, so why are all of the shelves nearly full?"

"Didn't they just put them on the shelves randomly until they ran out of space and had to use the floor?"

Izumo did have a point, but…

"Look."

She pointed at one shelf and the colors formed by the arrangement of books.

"It looks random, but the series are all lined up together."

It was obvious if one paid attention. Clumps of a single color formed groups on the shelves.

As for the seemingly random books that filled the gaps between them…

"They all have the same author or publisher. …It's all grouped together."

"Then," replied Sayama. "Are you saying the books here have some kind of meaning and are only meant to appear random?"

"I can agree with that," cut in Harakawa. He crossed his legs while still standing by the wall. "Something caught my attention too. Can I pull out the books?"

"Something caught your attention? What is it, Harakawa-kun?"

He shook his head at her question.

"You'll understand once I pull out the books. Wait until then. … Assuming I'm not imagining things."

He moved from the wall in order to pull out the books, so Hiba and Mikage left the bookcases they stood in front of.

"Um, Harakawa-san, do you want some help?"

"Hiba Ryuuji, have you ever worked as a mover or shipper? For those jobs, you need to remove books from a bookcase and put them back in the same order at the destination."

Without even looking at Hiba, Harakawa walked to the back bookcases and rolled up his sleeves.

"There might be a trick to the order of the books, so someone who can put them back how they were needs to do the work. And that's me."

*He always says things like that,* thought Shinjou as he spoke with his back turned.

*…But…*

Before she could continue her thought, Heo stepped up next to him.

Heo helped him line up the removed books behind him.

"In other words, Harakawa, you're an expert cleaner?"

“Don’t put it like that, Heo Thunderson. And stop plotting a change to our division of work at home. Got that?”

She groaned and fell silent, but they continued working without speaking.

They lined up the even piles of books behind them which formed a wall between them and the others.

As she watched them, Kazami gave Izumo a puzzled look.

“Hey, Kaku. Is it just me or are they making a wall of flirting with those books?”

“Yeah, their love comedy aura has gone beyond all acceptable levels. It’s enough to actually feel cold.”

“Ha ha ha. But, Izumo-san, Kazami-san, you two practically wrote the book on that kind of thing. Ha ha. Maybe that book is on one of these shelv- I’m sorry. I’ll go buy you a drink, so please stop giving me that look of scorn.”

“That wasn’t scorn. That was just a terrible joke.”

“Th-that’s even worse!”

Shinjou thought calmly to herself while watching that exchange.

*…We really have a unique cycle set up here, don’t we?*

She decided to stay out of it so she could stay normal, but she suddenly realized someone else was staying out of it too: Sayama.

He was the strangest of them all, so why was he not taking part? She thought about that for a bit.

“Ah. D-don’t tell me it’s weird *not* to take part in this strange conversation!”

“How did you reach that bizarre conclusion, Shinjou-kun?”

Sayama tilted his head and Baku emulated him.

He quietly looked her way and thought about something for approximately three seconds.

Immediately afterwards, he gave an understanding nod, removed his coat, and slapped his opened chest with one hand.

“Now, come at me!”

“With what?”

“With what? With what, you say? Heh heh heh. I suppose it would be hard for you to say it out loud!”

“Yes, the decidedly negative feeling I want to throw at you right now definitely is incredibly difficult to describe.”

Meanwhile, she heard some whispering voices.

“Look, Harakawa. Sayama and Shinjou have started their weird kind of flirting again.”

“Don’t let them influence you, Heo Thunderson. More importantly, do something about this, you stupid president.”

“I’d love to, but my divine protection doesn’t help against whatever has infected them. …How about you, Chisato?”

“No, I don’t like criticizing other people’s tastes.”

“You say that, Kazami-san, but why are you giving me that look saying I should go do it?”

Shinjou’s danger meter quickly filled, so she frantically spoke up.

“W-wait a second! Why is the cycle surrounding me now!?”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, the others are merely jealous. They can sense the happiness exuding from us.”

She tightened a nearby necktie and the windpipe releasing that “happiness” closed up and fell silent.

She then sighed in that silence.

“You know, Sayama-kun?”

“Chisato, I think we’re being tricked here.”

“You’re right, Kaku. They’re trying to alter their world for us.”

“E-enough of that! Let’s focus on this!!”

Shinjou pointed at Sayama.

“He’s been sitting there silently this whole time! Isn’t that weird!? You need to ask him why!”

“How’s he going to answer?” asked Kazami.

Shinjou looked to the boy she was pointing at.

For some reason, he was collapsed limply on the work bench with his red tie wrapped tightly around his neck.

“Stop turning this into a mock crime scene, Sayama-kun! You can’t just go to sleep and abandon your duty, so let’s take this seriously!!”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. That’s one hell of an interpretation there, Shinjou.”

However, Sayama loosened his tie while still pretending to lie limply on the desk.

“I am suffocating, Shinjou-kun. Heh heh. I believe I need mouth-to-mouth.”

She dropped her fist straight down on his stomach.

His body shot up from the desk, landed on his feet, and caught

Baku out of the air.

"Sh-Shinjou-kun, I said mouth-to-mouth, not fist-to-gut."

"Yes, yes."

Shinjou nodded with the biggest smile she could manage and slowly opened her mouth.

"Will those be your last words?"

"Now, how about we take this seriously?"

Sayama nodded and stepped up alongside her.

He calmly faced forward as the others glared at him.

He crossed his arms, placed a hand on his chin, and looked to one person in particular.

"Harakawa, have you reached your answer yet?"

"Once I remove this shelf, my suspicion will be effectively confirmed."

The boy turned back and Heo looked back too. She tilted her head toward Sayama from beyond the piles of books with almost equal heights.

"I don't really get it either. What is this?"

"Well, Heo-kun, it is nothing much. Also…that is Harakawa's answer to give."

They all turned toward Harakawa and Shinjou noticed that he had stopped removing the books.

*Why?* she wondered.

"Ah," said Heo as she faced the wall of piled-up books.

She raised her right hand with a look of surprise.

She spread her fingers and lowered them on top of one stack.

Each stack in the row was made from one of the shelves and there were six shelves' worth.

However…

"They're almost even."

Each stack came from a single shelf, so Shinjou felt it made sense for their heights to generally be the same.

However, that was not what Heo meant when she said "almost".

Of the six stacks in front of her, four were one book shorter than the other two.

However, that was not the problem.

終わりのクロニクル

The problem was the height of that difference.

"It's too exact," concluded Harakawa.

Everyone watched as Heo nodded.

The four shorter stacks were about the same height and the two taller ones were also about the same height.

The books formed two separate groups of equal height.

*…Why is that?*

After helping Harakawa, Heo tilted her head as if responding to Shinjou's silent question.

"What does this mean?"

She brushed her hands along the lower stacks to compare their heights, but the top books formed a perfectly horizontal surface.

"This equal height is intentional, isn't it? But why would you do that?"

She almost seemed to be talking to herself, but it gave Shinjou a sudden thought.

However, she was doubtful of the answer in her heart.

*…Huh? Can I really say this?"*

She was not sure, so she frowned, lightly crossed her arms, and felt a little concerned that her actions were identical to the dangerous individual next to her.

But in the end, she opened her mouth and spoke.

"You see this kind of thing in video games."

●

Heo listened to Shinjou from beyond the stacks of books.

"Video games?" she asked.

She did not know much about video games. She had moved so often when living in the United States and she had been too busy with various daily tasks to have much free time. Her great-grandfather had always asked if there was anything she wanted, but she could borrow books from the library and visiting a new library was always something to look forward to each time they moved.

After moving to Japan, Harakawa did not ask if she wanted anything, she could still visit the library, and she had yet to complete the bookshelves in the closet.

Her friends seemed to play some games, but with her club activities, everyday tasks, books, Harakawa, and the other strange

people around her, there was unfortunately no space left for games.

However, she did often hear her friends at school talking excitedly about the female-oriented games they played.

*…They're always talking about which guy they "won".*

*The Japanese seem to think of people as something to be conquered. Is that the influence of the previous world war?*

*If I'm going to date Harakawa properly, do I have to use Thunder Fellow to fire on him while he drives his motorcycle down the road at night?*

*But based on the games I've seen Ooshiro play, a Japanese girl is supposed to be a younger step sister, have pink hair, and have absurd speech quirks. But I don't think I can do that and I still don't know what Harakawa wants, so what's going to happen between us?*

"H-Heo? You look like you're thinking a little too hard, but the kind of game I was talking about is-…"

"Oh, y-yes!!"

She came back to her senses.

"If it's about a blonde uninvited guest, then everything's fine already!"

"That is not fine at all, Heo Thunderson."

"Eh? Th-then I'm not the right genre for you!?"

"Calm down, Heo. Write the character for rice on your palm and then lick it."

"Oh, I know that one. It's a Japanese custom that's supposed to calm you down, right?"

"No. If you do that, you'll realize how stupid you are."

Feeling dejected, she hung her head.

Harakawa sighed and stood up.

"Okay, what did you mean, Shinjou?"

"Heh heh heh. Harakawa, if you want to hear Shinjou-kun's wonderful idea, you will have to get through me firs- gh."

"Sorry, Harakawa-kun. There was a bit of background noise there. Now, what I'm saying is…there's that game, right?"

"There? Where is there?"

*…He always has to say things like that, doesn't he?*

Heo gave a silent nod of understanding at Harakawa's comment.

After sighing in her heart, she looked up and tilted her head

toward Shinjou.

"What kind of game? I don't really know the details."

"Y'know, the one where you place Ls on top of Ts and stick a long red one into the hole."

"I-is this some new 18+ world of spread legs!?"

Harakawa hit her on the back of the head.

"Ow. Wh-what was that for!?"

"Think of it as removing the poison from your brain. And for some general education, I'm going to get a game system from someone I know at the base."

"Thank you very much."

Heo bowed and found a hint in Shinjou's explanation.

She realized what the girl had been trying to say.

"This bookcase had two kinds of shelves: incomplete ones with a single book missing and complete ones?"

She seemed to be speaking to herself, but she then asked the others something.

"But…what books are missing?"

Everyone but Sayama – who was still collapsed on the work desk – tilted their heads.

They did not know.

Of course they did not. A few books were missing, but the Kinugasa Library was overflowing with books.

They needed to fill the empty space, but they had no way of knowing which books would work.

However…

"Don't worry. Someone give us an idea. It can be anything."

Kazami was the first to speak.

Heo looked up and saw the girl's eyebrows lifted with a powerful smile.

"If it's wrong, someone else can think up something. Since there's no clear answer, whoever says it first is the winner."

Someone agreed with Kazami with an "Nn."

It was Mikage and she raised her hand.

"Then that."

She pointed above Heo.

"Eh?"

Heo turned around and saw the top shelf of the left bookcase.

A globe sat on the far left end of that shelf.

In case there was some trick to the globe, they had not touched that shelf.

But as Heo looked up at the untouched shelf, she heard Mikage speak.

“That shelf is different. It has the globe and books filling the rest of it.”

Sure enough, the entire shelf past the globe’s base was crammed full of books.

*…That top shelf is a completed one.*

*In that case,* she thought.

Before she could continue, Sayama’s voice filled the room.

“There are nine shelves on each bookcase, which is eighteen between the two. And other than the completed shelf on the top left, we have found that two of six shelves are entirely filled. That means,” he continued. “A crude ratio calculation gives us an incomplete to complete shelf ratio of four to two. There are eighteen shelves in all, so twelve of them have empty spaces and six do not. However, one shelf is already completed by the globe, so that shelf can be eliminated from the calculation.”

“So either eleven have empty spaces or five don’t?”

“Correct.” Sayama nodded. “Does the number eleven ring any bells? For example, a set of eleven books in this very library?”

Heo saw Sayama kneeling on top of the desk.

He formed a small smile as everyone focused on him.

“The answer is simple. Bring in all eleven volumes of Professor Kinugasa’s mythology encyclopedia. Perhaps the bookcase door will open if we place them in the proper gaps on the shelves.”

“B-but Sayama-kun, where in the bookcases do we put them?”

Heo nodded in agreement with Shinjou.

There were gaps in the shelves, but would the bookcases really move just from filling them?

If there was a switch…

“I think where we put the books might be a riddle.”

“The answer to that is also simple,” replied Sayama.

He knew the answer from the current situation.

*…What here gave him the answer?*

That thought somewhat filled Heo with a desire to continue on.

Just like her previous timid suggestion, she wanted to find the answer here.

*…But I need a hint.*

She found one.

It was the object Mikage had pointed at earlier and it was on the completed top left shelf of the incomplete bookcase.

She could now speak the word that led to the answer.

"The globe. No, the world and the eleven mythologies found there!"

She saw the corner of Sayama's mouth rise in a smile as he nodded.

"I see. In that case, what should we do, Heo-kun?"

"Well," she answered.

She glanced over at Harakawa. He was already holding the top and bottom of the stacks of books between his hands and returning them to the shelf.

Realizing her words had led him to do that, she spoke.

"Based on the globe in the top left, we can view the two bookcases like a world map…and we put the eleven mythologies in the appropriate place on that map."

She realized confidence filled her face.

"I think the entrance to Professor Kinugasa's study is one with a view of every Gear and its mythology!"

●

About three minutes after Heo's confident statement, they had placed the appropriate books on the shelves.

However, the bookcases did not move.

The eleven books were in the proper regions for their respective mythologies, but…

"Eh? Wh-why aren't the bookcases moving? Um, uh, well…"

Before Heo grew completely flustered, Shinjou had a thought.

*…The usual cruel show is about to begin.*

After putting in the books, Kazami and Hiba expressed their confusion.

"Huh!?"

Kazami held her head in her hands and her tone said this had to be some kind of mistake.

“Why isn’t it opening!? And after Heo had such a good idea!!”

“This is strange, Kazami-san! And after Heo-san worked so hard to come up with that answer!!”

“No, um, I only, uh…”

“What is going on here!? Hiba, put some more effort into this for Heo’s sake!”

“You’re right, Kazami-san. I don’t know how to put effort into this, but I’ll do it for Heo-san’s sake!”

“Um, but I, uh, must have been wro-…”

“No, we were definitely the ones who did something wrong. Right, Hiba!? Especially you!!”

“Yes! I don’t really know what I’m being accused of here, but I’ve started to think I might as well just go along with it!”

“U-um, I don’t know what’s going on, but, um, uh…”

“Let’s put all eleven in again, Hiba! Fnaaaaahhh!!”

“Nwaaahh!!”

“I-I don’t think putting the books in more forcefully is going to help. Um, uh…”

Heo was almost in tears and she turned to Harakawa who was putting some books in order to the side.

“Harakawa, they’re bullying me-… Don’t ignore me, Harakawa!”

As she watched the exchange, a previous thought returned to Shinjou.

*…This is really is a unique kind of natural cycle.*

She considered saying something to help but decided against it to make sure she was not caught in the crossfire.

However, this was odd.

Kinugasa Tenkyou’s books had filled the empty spaces perfectly.

It had almost seemed to say that those eleven mythology encyclopedias had originally been in this shelf.

Also, the spaces in the shelves had corresponded to the regions for the various mythologies, so they had been able to find the proper locations using an atlas.

And when they had put the books in…

“There was a sound.”

Kazami had been the one to notice a sound much like the hands of a clock moving somewhere in the bookcases.

They had relied on her hearing while putting in the eleven books

and she had heard eleven sounds as they filled the bookcases.

However, the door did not open.

“Why not?” muttered Shinjou.

Meanwhile, Izumo opened a plastic bottle of oolong tea while sitting at the work desk.

“Why even ask? We were wrong. That’s why it won’t open. Then again, I guess you could ask why it won’t open if you had it right and it still didn’t open.”

Kazami frowned at that and turned around.

“Hey, Kaku. Everyone’s trying to think.”

“I’m thinking too. But my thoughts can’t get past a certain point.”

“A certain point?”

He brought the bottle to his mouth and swallowed once.

“According to Sayama, his mom looked after these bookcases, right?”

“Well, yes. She was the librarian, so she would have organized the shelves…”

Sure enough, most of the flood of information filling the shelves as books was from the late Showa era.

*…There would have been different books during Professor Kinugasa’s era.*

As the books aged, Sayama’s mother must have searched out books of the same size to take their place.

“In other words, the current form of the bookcases is based on Sayama’s mom’s rules. However, Professor Kinugasa’s books would have to be put inside based on the pure Kinugasa rules.”

“…”

“I’m not sure how to put it, but I’m trying to say that the way we see the bookcases now isn’t how Professor Kinugasa made them. I don’t know if that’ll help, but it sounded like you were mostly overlooking that.”

Izumo was exactly right.

The spines of the books and their thicknesses were all almost modern, but they had not noticed.

One reason for that was the misconception that bookcases and books were the same in any era.

*…What did the bookcase look like in Professor Kinugasa’s time?*

The space filled by the books would have been the same and the

books to add would still have been the eleven encyclopedias, so…

"Would anything have been different?"

It was not clear if answering that would tell them anything, but it was worth pursuing and one thing was certain.

They had been so focused on finding the "trick" that they had forgotten to look at it from a different viewpoint.

That being…

"How did Professor Kinugasa open the bookcase door?"

Even as she spoke, Shinjou realized something.

Opening that door was not a matter of solving a trick.

…*We have to reproduce what Professor Kinugasa did to open it.*

"That's right," she muttered while bringing a hand to her cheek and beginning to walk.

She walked forward, toward the bookcases.

"How would Professor Kinugasa have opened it?"

She felt the others' eyes on her as she arrived at the bookcases.

"First, he would probably have placed the eleven books on this work desk."

"Not in the library?" asked Sayama.

"Carrying eleven books in from the library couldn't have been easy. He only had one arm, remember?"

She pulled out one of the books.

"For example," she began. "Putting in all eleven each time would be a pain, so maybe he only removed one and set it on the desk."

She pulled out a book with her right hand.

It was the eleventh volume which covered the Bible. It was so old that the cover was too worn down to read the title.

She felt the weight of its many pages in her right hand as she walked back to the desk.

…*Let's see…*

As everyone watched her, she nervously brushed aside the snacks and set down the book.

It was bound on the left and written horizontally. She had heard it was made that way to help Professor Kinugasa use it with only his right arm.

With the left-bound book, she could easily hold the pages with her right thumb and flip through them.

She did so and flipped to the final page. Before closing it, she

noted the author's name was written using the alphabet and the publisher was Izumo Publishing.

After making sure she was looking at the back cover, she stuck her fingers between the front cover and the desk.

She lifted it up with the spine in her hand to make sure the title would be visible and then she stood up.

"And now I put it back-…"

"W-wait a second!"

She heard Hiba's voice and considered ignoring him as was customary, but…

"Um, what is it?"

"Did you just consider ignoring me?"

"Would you prefer I did?"

"No, no."

He frantically shook his head and then looked behind him.

"Mikage-san."

"?"

Mikage approached with a question mark on her face.

Meanwhile, Hiba turned back to Shinjou.

"Sorry, Shinjou-san, but can I borrow that book?"

"Eh? But I don't have any porn."

"Ha ha ha. I already got the latest ones of that from a loyal member of our alliance, so-…"

Everyone gave him legitimately worried looks, so he fell silent for two seconds with a smile frozen on his face.

He finally cleared his throat and gave a serious look.

"I meant the book you're holding right there!"

"Oh, well why didn't you say so? …Here, Mikage-san."

"Nn."

"Um, are you treating me like I'm made of air?"

"No, air isn't perverted. And I can just give it to Mikage-san, right?"

He nodded, hung his head, and fell to his knees.

"Is this persecution? No, did I do something wrong? No, no, no, no."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but what do we do now that Mikage-san has the book?"

"Eh? Oh, right. Mikage-san, just copy what Shinjou-san did."

“Nn. Copy it exactly?”

Mikage asked that as she sat in the chair, but Hiba shook his head as he stood.

“No, do it how you would. And only use your right hand.”

Shinjou then saw why Hiba had stopped her.

●

Mikage mentally tilted her head.

*…What is this about?*

She did not really get it, but Hiba seemed to think she would solve something by doing this.

Hiba had not said why, but she decided she should do this as naturally as possible.

This was the same as when he said she should go outside or that she would have fun if she got in the water. The reasoning behind those statements was uncertain, but she would likely gain something if she did it anyway.

And so she nodded.

“Nn.”

She did what Shinjou had done, but in her own way.

First, she read it.

She held the right side of the left-bound book in her right hand so she could flip through the pages and she placed the spine of the book on the desk.

That placed the book vertically with only the cover lying to the left.

She held the pages with her right thumb, released them by moving that thumb, and let them spill to the left.

There was a slight waver to the sound of the flipping pages and their speed was random.

After reaching the end of the pages, she closed the back cover.

“Nn.”

She nodded and grabbed the book the way she always did at home.

She stood and immediately realized that everyone was looking at her and gasping.

“…?”

She did not understand. She had not done anything special. She

did the same thing whenever she grabbed a book from a table or desk.

There was something different from when Shinjou had done it, but what did that matter?

With that in mind, she asked a question.

“Was that good?”

●

Kazami nodded at Mikage’s question.

“Yes.”

She breathed in and spoke as if checking with herself.

“I think that must be how Professor Kinugasa would have held the books.”

She looked at Mikage’s right hand.

The girl’s slender fingers held the book, but not by the spine.

“By the opposite side,” she slowly muttered.

The others nodded and she recalled the previous moment.

There was a clear difference between Shinjou and Mikage’s methods.

All they had done was pick up a closed book.

Shinjou had used the spine where the title was written.

If placed vertically on a shelf like that, the title would be visible.

After closing the book, she had needed to let go of the book.

Only then had she grabbed the spine and picked up.

But Mikage had been different.

She had not let go of the book after closing it.

She had kept her hand on the back cover with the front cover pointed down.

*…And she pulled it toward her.*

It was obvious once she did it. She had relied on the friction of her palm to slide the book along the desk.

Once it reached the edge of the desk…

*…She picked it up with that same side.*

Her hand never left the book, so it could be seen as the lazy way.

But it was the kind of technique one would develop after years of eliminating unnecessary effort.

Shinjou’s method had been careful and had ensured the title would be visible on the shelf, but one could say she was being too

cautious.

Mikage had not had full use of her hands until recently, so she had prioritized function over form.

That was where her technique had come from.

*…It is possible Professor Kinugasa was a careful person, but…*

One fact allowed them to reject that possibility: the cover of the book Mikage held.

"The covers of Professor Kinugasa's books are all worn down, but that's due to more than just their age."

"I think it's because he always slid them across the desk or table with the cover facing down," said Heo.

Everyone but Mikage nodded in agreement.

The cover of the book in Mikage's hand was worn down, but the title on the spine and the back cover were not. Only the front cover was noticeably worn.

*…In that case, the correct answer is to put the books in the shelves backwards.*

Kazami imagined the bookcases as they had been originally.

Most of the books would have been put in with the spine to the back and only Professor Kinugasa would have known what they were.

Had he never fixed them no matter how much people complained? Or had it just naturally ended up like that?

She did not know, but she had seen the actions of that man in Mikage's movements and it gave her a smile with a bit of bitterness mixed in.

She looked to Mikage who held up the book and tilted her head.

"Is this good? Ryuuji-kun's mom says it isn't good because it damages the book."

"That was perfect, Mikage-san."

Kazami heard a smile in Hiba's voice.

"After all, that book wanted you to hold it like that. Now…"

He placed his hand over hers and pushed in the final book.

"This will surely open the door to the Study!"

Something reacted to their movement.

It was Baku.

The creature raised his front paws on Sayama's head.

A moment later, they all saw the past.

●

Heo saw the color white in the night.

*…Eh?*

Where was she?

She did not know. All she could see were the dark night sky and a white land below it.

The white was the snow falling from the sky.

The white ground swelled up in places and those places formed…

*…A slide and swings.*

She realized this was a park.

It was in an elevated place and it had a proper gate. It looked like a clearing on top of a cliff.

A church-like building existed to the north of the park and its roof was pure white.

She noticed the church had recently been built with a brand new bell tower and concert hall added on.

A large cherry tree grew near the cliff on the opposite end and the snow was beginning to accumulate on its branches.

Heo moved her vision toward the open area near the cliff.

*"…"*

Once she arrived on the edge, her field of vision opened up.

A nighttime city spread out below and the night sky above was obstructed by the falling snow.

How far did this snow stretch into the distance?

The city was dark and yet colored a dark blue by the falling snow. The countless lights of human life filled that city.

*…This is…*

She had heard about this place. An orphanage with a large cherry tree had existed on top of a hill, but it had collapsed during the tertiary damages of the Great Kansai Earthquake.

If that building was still here…

*…This is before the Great Kansai Earthquake?*

If this was Sakai and the dark expanse beyond the city was the Seto Inland Sea, then Osaka and north were to the right. That was the city she had seen burning in a previous dream of the past.

She suddenly turned in that direction, but…

*…I can't see it.*

All she could see beyond the falling snow was a great darkness.

However…

"…?"

Something seemed odd about the darkness before her eyes.

*…What is it?*

She knew something was not right, but she could not put her finger on what that was. It felt like she had not realized what baseline she was using to think of this as "right".

However, she remembered finding something similarly "not right" once before.

*…That was in a previous dream of the past.*

It was when she had seen Top-Gear's Osaka burn below the dark sky.

*No,* she corrected herself. *It wasn't the city that felt odd back then.*

*…It was the sky.*

When looking up into that space she could fly through, something had seemed wrong.

"I saw the stars."

The sky had been nothing but darkness while Hiba's father had fought, but once her own father's mechanical dragon had arrived, the darkness had cleared and the stars had come into view.

Something had seemed wrong about her vision clearing and those normal specks of light appearing. She was feeling that same thing here.

*…But…*

Osaka was merely hidden by the dark sky and the snow. It was normal not to see the stars here, so she still could not figure out what exactly felt wrong.

But she was still filled with doubt and she took a step back while tilting her head.

Suddenly, someone stepped forward to her right.

"!?"

Her mind shrank back.

It was a slender woman in a lab coat. Her black hair was tied back and she stood on the edge of the cliff with her breath visible in the cold air.

She stopped in front of the railing that snow had started

accumulating on and her gaze and white breaths turned toward the sky.

She looked across the sky as if checking on the entirety of the heavens.

She turned around.

The bottom of her white lab coat fluttered above the white snow and her black hair danced toward the heavens.

Heo then saw the woman's black eyes and slender face.

*…Shinjou!?*

Heo knew that Shinjou Yukio had defected to Top-Gear.

She also knew that woman had caused the destruction of Top-Gear.

If that woman was here and the orphanage was safe…

*…This is Top-Gear's Sakai before the battle!*

Why was Baku showing them this?

Baku was said to show people the past when it was necessary for them.

Did he choose what to show or did the past have him show it?

Heo did not know, but she saw Shinjou Yukio look up into the sky, spread her arms, and face the gate.

"——————"

Heo heard a song.

She recognized it. Her own mother had sung this song.

She recalled its title was Silent Night.

"…!"

But that was when her mind was thrust into darkness.

*…This scene from the past…*

How was it necessary?

To Shinjou and Sayama it may have been a challenge meant to show them what they needed to pursue.

And to Heo…

*…What was that feeling that something was off?*

She may have been imagining it, but…

*…I felt it, so I need to act on it.*

As soon as she decided that, her entire being was dragged back to reality.

●

Once she woke from the past, Shinjou looked to the room in front of her.

It was a small room hidden behind the bookcases.

This was the Study.

The preparation room's scarlet light showed a tall but otherwise small room.

It was only about six square meters, it had a wooden desk in the center, and the left and right walls were bookcases.

The ceiling was high and it had openings for two air conditioning ducts. And the back wall…

"A barrier?"

Just as Heo said, the back wall was different from the rest.

The floor and the other walls were made of wood, but that back wall was white.

The white surface was about four meters wide and two meters tall. Above that, a normal wooden wall began and continued to the tall ceiling.

The room was too poorly lit to see it well, but a vertical line ran through the center of the white surface, splitting it in two.

As they all stood motionless in the preparation room, Shinjou spoke quietly.

"So this is the Study."

"Yes," said Sayama from her right.

He looked her way, nodded, and moved forward.

"I think the other Georgius that Professor Kinugasa hid is located through that barrier. According to the Kinugasa Document, it should be the negative Georgius."

After saying that, he came to a sudden stop.

*…What is it?*

Shinjou stepped forward and found two things.

First, there was a wrist-wide hole on either side of the barrier.

They were the perfect size to stick an arm into and she could only see darkness inside.

And second, there was something on the desk.

It was…

"A binder, a photograph, and a letter?"

The faded binder contained some documents and something was written on the cover in obvious magic marker.

Sayama read it aloud.

"Babel Interior Investigation – 1983."

But that was not all that was written.

"Shinjou Yukio and…Sayama Asagi!?"

Sayama held his chest with his right hand just as Kazami's voice reached them from behind.

"What!? I thought only Professor Kinugasa ever entered Babel? Why were Sayama's father and Shinjou's mother inside?"

"It was from the blank period, so of course there were no records of it. And based on what this says, I think only my father and Shinjou-kun's mother were able to get inside."

*How?* wondered Shinjou. *During the National Defense Department and old UCAT days, only Professor Kinugasa could get inside Babel, so how did our parents get inside and write this report?*

Most likely, no one knew the answer.

She then looked to the photograph and letter on the desk.

The letter was sealed and…

*…My mom's name is listed as the sender.*

The photograph sitting next to Shinjou Yukio's letter was large.

"A group photo in the mountains, just like with the National Defense Department and old UCAT."

It showed a number of young men and women.

"My parents are there," muttered Heo in a daze.

Shinjou did not need to say anything. Her mother was clearly there too.

This photo was from a time in the blank period before Shinjou Yukio had betrayed Low-Gear.

*…They probably all went together to investigate Babel.*

So if only her mother and Sayama's father had been able to get in…

"Now we really do need to search for you mother's past, Shinjou-kun. We need to find out what she did."

"Yes."

*What are we going to discover?* she asked, knowing no one could answer that.

That answer would only come later.

# Chapter 9

## “Sudden Weakness”

You couldn’t reach her
By the time you did, it was too late
And only tears of excuses remain

●

A large space was filled with the color white.

It was located underground, it was fifty meters square, and white tables and decorative plants filled the large area between the columns.

It was a cafeteria and the paper sign on the wall said “Japanese UCAT Temporary Cafeteria”.

This space had been prepared while the aboveground cafeteria on Japanese UCAT’s second floor was being repaired. It and the spaces for experiment relocation had been among the first of the newly constructed underground facilities.

When evening transitioned to night, the cafeteria was usually filled with people eating dinner.

Today should not have been an exception, but it was relatively empty for the time period.

This was not due to a lack of people. Field operations personnel were filling the tables near the entrance and emergency exit.

However, the number of people grew sparse toward the center of the tables.

Only three people sat at the white table in the very center.

And everyone was staring at those three.

On one side was a blonde woman in a jacket and on the other side were an elderly man in white and a well-built elderly woman in white.

The two in white had loops of paper around their wrists.

An aluminum pot on a portable burner sat between the three of them.

The woman in the jacket was putting meat inside the pot.

“C’mon, Hajji-san. C’mon, Jord-san. If you don’t eat sukiyaki quickly, the meat gets too tough.”

“Yes.” The elderly man in white, Hajji, nodded and broke apart his chopsticks. “Are you sure you should be communicating with us every week like this, Ooki?”

Hajji saw some splinters on the break of the chopsticks and rubbed them together to smooth them down.

“To be honest, I have no intention of changing my stance as an enemy of Low-Gear. You know that, don’t you? Hm?”

“Well, there’s no helping that. We both have our parts to play here.”

“Then why have you been inviting us to eat with you each week for the past month and a half?”

“I’m not choosing you two specifically.”

Ooki smiled while taking some shirataki from the pot and rice from her bowl and putting them both in her mouth.

“In my financial situation, I can only invite two people once a week. When I say only two can come, the others confined down below always suggest you two go.”

She took a breath and swallowed the rice.

“Wow. It really is great getting to eat rice with it. …Anyway, it feels like the others either trust you or want you to eat instead of them.”

“I see.” Hajji nodded again. “It is true eating and chatting here is better than eating alone in that room I can never leave. Yes.”

“How about you, Jord-san?”

“Me?”

Jord slowly grabbed her chopsticks in her fist, jabbed them into the pot, and pulled out some meat.

However, the large hunk of meat broke apart as she lifted it and only a small piece remained.

“My betrayed expectations are really getting to show what they can do.”

She smiled bitterly and Ooki gave a troubled smile back.

Ooki then took some meat from a nearby plate and handed it to Jord.

Jord glanced at the other woman and lifted the corner of her mouth in a smile.

“Oh? You’re a pretty nice person. The food tastes better with someone like you around.”

“Then you must be a nice person too, Jord-san. Anyone who can enjoy a good meal is a good person.”

Ooki pulled out a charred green onion.

“Neither of you is a bad person.”

“Oh, really? That’s just your excessive kindness tricking you. We’re the enemies of this world.”

“But we eat the same food. …That means we can only live in the

same kind of world. Oh, I just said something complicated for the first time in a while."

"But food is entirely different from politics and emotions, Ooki. Both politicians and bad people still eat."

Hajji poked around inside the bowl and his chopsticks came to a sudden stop.

"You put fried tofu in sukiyaki? That is certainly unusual. Yes."

"It's amazing if you let it soak up the soup and eat it with rice."

Hajji saw that the fried tofu still had some yellow to it and pulled it all toward himself.

He then glanced around at the people in white armored uniforms sitting about two tables away.

"This is quite a peaceful meal. Yes. …But Ooki, what if we tried to escape? I expect some of those suggesting we eat with you are hoping we will take action."

Hearing that, the surrounding people rose slightly from their seats.

Meanwhile, Jord gulped down the tea in her cup.

"We have paper bonds on our arms and legs and this entire underground space is controlled by a concept. If we tried to reach the surface without permission, the concept would send us back underground without us noticing. Of course, that kind of thing won't work on us very well."

The two prisoners' words created a powerful aura that weighed down on the others, but one person seemed wholly unaffected.

That person was Ooki.

She calmly placed her favorite ingredients inside the pot.

"You two won't try to escape. After all, you lost."

The word "lost" chilled the cafeteria air a little.

Hajji and Jord slowly faced Ooki once more and the others prepared to react at a moment's notice.

However, Ooki's expression was as carefree as ever as she flipped over some meat.

"The others from your group are outside. And so are the Top-Gear people. …They retreated from that battle, but they haven't lost yet. But if you or the others here met back up with them, you would bring your loss with you."

She took a breath.

"Also, you've done what you can as the Army, so you want them to do what they can while not relying on your power."

"You have quite the active imagination."

"Ah ha ha. Maybe I do. But…"

"But?" urged Jord.

Ooki grabbed some meat with a smile.

It turned out to be a large piece, so she gave an excited cry. The other two defiantly grabbed their own large pieces from the plates next to them and threw them into the pot.

As that meat began to sizzle, Ooki broke an egg over hers.

She then gave the continuation to her previous "but".

"They're on the move, aren't they? The people you trust are trying to find some kind of answer. After all, my students are doing the same, so there's no way yours will stay still."

"I see." Hajji sighed and shrugged. "Mine are powerful."

"Yes, but so are you. And Jord-san too." Ooki gave a bitter smile. "It may not seem like it since you were captured, but Hajji-san pushed back Director Abram on the surface and made it all the way to the sixth basement. And then you defeated Director Abram again and you never would have been defeated if it hadn't been for Shinjou-san and Sayama-kun's power. …And Jord-san was the same. You wouldn't have been defeated if it hadn't been for Kazami-san."

"I'm honored to have your praise. Yes."

"Praise is surprisingly embarrassing."

"Really?" asked Ooki with an embarrassed smile of her own.

She then continued her previous thought.

"The people who are on the move now earned the trust of people as strong as you, didn't they?"

"Yes. But you seem very carefree about that assessment. Are you not afraid that the enemy is on the move?"

"The others will do what they want whether I'm afraid or not. Those kids wouldn't listen even if I did try to stop them. And no matter which side wins, I think they'll find some kind answer, so I just want them to do everything they can and leave no regrets."

She suddenly gave a questioning look.

"Is that wrong for a teacher?"

Hajji and Jord exchanged a glance but eventually looked back to Ooki.

The three of them leaned in toward each other over the pot.

"To be honest, we're pretty much the same. We're still your enemy and everything that comes from our mouths is going to come from our grudge against this world, but apart from that, we do have hope for the future that this fighting will create. So be careful."

Hajji nodded and continued.

"The ones we trust will be taking this seriously. …I only hope your students are as well."

Ooki nodded, raised her eyebrows a bit, and brought her hands to her chest.

"No need to worry about that."

She took a breath.

"After all, I was the one to teach them."

The cafeteria immediately filled with an explosion of protesting voices.

●

A road ran through the night.

The asphalt one-lane road passed through a residential area.

The houses were lit, but no voices could be heard within.

It was winter and the end of the year was approaching, so the windows were closed tight to keep in the heat and everything else.

Only the excess light escaped and a shadow moved through that light.

The shadow was cast by a motorcycle with a sidecar.

The motorcycle's engine was silent because this was a residential area at night. The engine's noise would reflect off the asphalt, reverberate through houses, and reach the ears of the people closed inside.

That was why two people pushed the motorcycle. One was a boy holding the handlebars from the right and the other was a girl pushing on the back of the sidecar from the left.

The boy looked back over his left shoulder.

"Are your hands cold, Mikage-san?"

"Nn. I'm fine, Ryuuji-kun. And we're not far from home."

"Is that so?"

Hiba nodded and faced forward again.

A certain thought about Mikage came to him as the chilly winter

air washed over him.

*…She doesn't just go with the flow anymore.*

Until that summer, he had always been with her. But once the battle with 3rd-Gear ended and they joined UCAT, she had started acting on her own discretion more.

Did she want to use her own legs now that she could walk?

Did she want to be less of a burden on him?

Once Heo had joined them, Mikage had stayed with her quite a lot. He had once asked why.

"Because we're similar," she had answered with a tilt of the head.

He could see some of that as they pushed the motorcycle now. Both of the girls normally rode in the sidecar and they had both joined Team Leviathan after most of the others.

*…And they're both part of the blonde genre!*

He nodded in his heart and thought about asking her if she was cold.

"…"

But he decided against it.

He felt he was worrying too much and then wondered if feeling that way was in itself worrying too much.

So he opened his mouth and said something else instead.

"It's a shame we never managed to open that barrier in the Study, isn't it?"

The barrier had a wrist-sized hole on either side and they had found the inside was split into the shape of five fingers.

They could feel a dividing line at the wrist, so the inside of the hole was clearly made to turn.

However, neither of them would do so.

Hiba and Mikage had matched their timing perfectly, Izumo and Kazami had used all their strength, Harakawa and Heo had used some strange sort of effort, and Sayama and Shinjou had tried their best while Sayama said and did some odd things.

*…But they never turned.*

They had originally been checking over the holes to make sure they were not a trap, but that had changed once Mikage had slowly stuck her hand inside one.

Hiba had frantically asked her if she was okay and she had answered with a smile.

“I’m fine, Ryuuji-kun. Nothing happened. So you try to turn the other one with me.”

“Of course!!!”

He had immediately thrust his hand inside and jammed three of his fingers because it was split between the fingers inside.

The others had quietly asked each other why he threw himself at things like that, but he did not care.

At any rate, he and Mikage had been unable to turn them.

Kazami and Izumo had used all their strength, but Kazami had immediately pulled out her hand.

“It’s no use. This is all about the initial burst of strength, right? If it doesn’t work then, it’s never going to work. Keeping at it will only hurt your wrist. …And I’ll break my nails.”

Harakawa and Heo had failed and Sayama and Shinjou had done no better.

Hiba had baselessly assumed Sayama and Shinjou would be able to do it.

They had discussed it afterwards and found that Sayama’s left hand and Shinjou’s right hand had been the closest fit to the shape inside. That had revealed that the left and right holes were different sizes inside.

However, the barrier would not open no matter how many times they tried.

Shinjou had said the following:

“Well, if it would open that easily, wouldn’t Sayama-kun’s mother have opened it?”

Kazami had added:

“It looks like you need something other than the best fit to get past Professor Kinugasa’s trick.”

And according to Sayama:

“It is hard to believe, but we may require a key in addition to the perfect fit that Shinjou-kun and I have.”

And…

“If my mother never opened it, that key must not be here. Professor Kinugasa had connections to the National Defense Department and the Izumo Company in general, so the possibilities are as limitless as the ever-expanding universe.”

In the end, they had left opening that barrier and retrieving

Georgius as a task for later.

Fortunately, Georgius came from Professor Kinugasa, so it had no connection to Top-Gear or the other problems of the past. Sayama had decided they did not need to find it immediately.

However, one thing had bothered them. Heo had mentioned it to Sayama as they ended their meeting.

She had felt something odd about the sky in their dream of the past. She did not know what exactly it was, but that girl with the greatest connection to the sky had felt something off about Top-Gear's sky. It was certainly worth keeping in mind.

*…Sayama-san and Shinjou-san are on their way to Izumo and Sakai. They're searching for Shinjou-san's mother's past since it's probably closely related to Top-Gear.*

After thinking that far, Hiba returned his focus to his vision and his hands.

He spoke while pushing the motorcycle through the night with Mikage.

"Sayama-san and Shinjou-san are probably boarding their train right now."

"Really?"

Mikage did not know much about trains. He doubted she even knew that the Chuo Line began at Tokyo Station.

"How about we take a train somewhere sometime soon?"

"Nn. Then…how about to UCAT?"

"Why that hellhole? And we go there all the time."

"Nn. But never by train. Sayama and the others use the train, don't they?"

That gave Hiba a thought.

*…If she learns how to get to UCAT by train…*

She would be able to go there on her own.

He almost asked if that was what she wanted, but he stopped himself.

*I keep stopping myself from asking things,* he sighed n his heart.

Lately, Mikage had started doing a lot and helping with a lot, but she would sometimes surprise him by suddenly showing off her results. For example, when Heo had taught her to cook, she had brought him a completed meal after he returned from training or school. He had been surprised and happy that she could do so much,

but he had also been bothered that he had not been a part of it.

*…We aren't passing each other by, are we?*

He firmly rejected that idea. *That isn't true,* he told himself. *If it was, she wouldn't be pushing from behind.*

*…And she wouldn't offer to take a bath with me!*

Yes, she had made that promise after leaving the medical room.

He accepted the bath as a fundamental truth.

She wanted to show him something she had not shown him recently, so he suspected something had changed in her mind or body.

*…I hope we can start taking baths together all the time again.*

He decided to trust in her change, but he heard her voice from behind.

"I wonder if Sayama and Shinjou will be okay."

"I'm sure they will. 8th-Gear's Concept Core is below Izumo UCAT and they'll return after a quick stop in Sakai. Apparently, they'll be bringing 8th's Concept Core with them."

"I see."

"Are you worried?"

"Nn," she replied. "Because there are 3rd automatons at Izumo UCAT."

"That's right," he said before turning a bitter smile toward her. "But if Sayama-san needed help, he would definitely tell us and he would never put Shinjou-san in danger."

He saw Mikage looking at him.

"Nn." She smiled. "That's right."

"Yes, it is."

He nodded and thought to himself.

*…She's so damn cute when she smiles!! What? What is this flavor in my heart! It's sweet!?*

But he hid those thoughts and faced forward.

They were almost home and that meant they were almost to the bath. That was fantastic.

But there was something he had to say.

"We need to make sure we don't let our guard down either. We have 3rd-Gear's Concept Core, so those automatons at Izumo UCAT might challenge us to a fight."

He expected another "nn" in response, but he did not immediately

receive one.

Assuming she was thinking, he waited a few seconds and finally got something in return.

The motorcycle handlebars shot forward and out of his grasp.

“!?”

He could only imagine Mikage had given a powerful shove to the sidecar.

“Mikage-san!?”

When he turned around, he saw Mikage collapsed on the back of the sidecar.

●

Hiba looked to Mikage who lay on top of the sidecar.

*…Did she trip?*

But that idea was immediately overturned.

Something had appeared on the back of her right shoulder.

“A knife…”

The blade looked about fifteen centimeters long and it had a black grip.

It was sticking up from her clothing as if it had been stopped by her shoulder blade.

Wondering who had done this, Hiba strained his ears for any sign of the enemy, but he found nothing.

He knew it was dangerous, but he turned around and ran toward Mikage.

“Nn…”

She let out a quiet voice and tried to get up.

That action added color to the clothing at the base of the knife.

Even in the night, the dark color was impossible to miss. That color was the proof that Mikage was human.

“Mikage-san! Don’t move! You’ll only widen the wound!”

But she still tried to get up. It was as if she were trying to show him she was fine.

A moment later, Hiba sensed a presence behind him.

“————!!”

He swung his right hand on reflex.

The palm of that hand immediately grabbed something: the guard of a knife.

He looked down to see the black grip of a knife extending from his palm.

And the blade of the knife was extending from the back of his hand.

"…!"

Someone had thrown the knife and he had stabbed it into his own hand, but he had no regrets. If he had not done that, it would have pierced the left side of Mikage's back.

He clenched his teeth to bear with the cold, penetrating pain and he pulled the knife out.

"Mikage-san."

He turned back around and leaned over Mikage's back to protect her and push her down as she tried to get up.

"…Nn."

He tried to remove the knife from her shoulder, but in that instant, he saw something.

As she lay collapsed on the sidecar and faced forward, a certain emotion filled her face.

It was surprise.

"Ryuuji-kun! In front!"

He looked in the indicated direction and saw the color silver approaching.

But this was not another knife. It was thicker and longer.

He also saw someone holding it.

They stood in front of the sidecar and swung down the Japanese sword.

"Tatsumi!?"

Tatsumi's black combat coat fluttered around her and her left arm sent down the blade with enough speed to escape the wind.

"It's been a while. …Don't tell me you thought 3rd's automatons were the only opponents you had to watch out for."

With instantaneous speed, she rushed forward without hesitation.

"Top-Gear still intends to fight you."

Hiba was filled with as much surprise as Mikage had been and that slowed everything down.

In the three-beat sequence of perception, understanding, and reaction, he ended up a definite step slower than Tatsumi.

Her attack was targeting him.

But even if he avoided the sword, it would reach Mikage below him.

After considering using the knife to strike her just as she struck him, he reached a certain answer.

He chose to protect something more important than himself.

"…!"

He completely covered Mikage from above.

He would protect her no matter what happened.

She had a blade in her back as she tried to get up. That foreign object would prevent her from joining with Susamikado and it meant she could not use her full strength.

So he embraced her from behind.

He felt her body jump in surprise.

"Ryuuji-kun!?"

She cried out in confusion and she seemed to have realized what he intended to do and what Tatsumi's actions would cause.

She knew he was trying to protect her no matter what happened to him in the process.

He felt her breathe in and then…

"Susamikado!!"

Her ringing voice called in the pieces of that steel power.

●

It all occurred in a series of instants.

A black god of war appeared behind Mikage and Hiba.

Metallic sounds filled the air, the pieces of its body fit together, and its metal left fist shot forward.

Tatsumi did not stop her sword, so its tip collided with Susamikado's fist.

However, three things happened then.

First, it produced no sound whatsoever.

Second, Tatsumi remained standing and was not knocked backwards.

And third, Susamikado's fist was stopped by the tip of her sword.

An attack from a god of war standing nearly ten meters tall could not break the tip of that sword.

Tatsumi simply pulled back her left elbow a bit and gently reversed her wrist.

Mikage opened her eyes wide and gasped at the scene before her eyes.

"It can't be," she muttered.

"Mikage-chan, don't look so surprised." Tatsumi smiled. "You actually did pretty well to make me pull back my elbow."

Tatsumi had absorbed the force of Susamikado's blow with just the movement of her left arm and the sword and she now raised her right hand.

After she inhaled and snapped her fingers, something appeared behind her.

It was Typhon.

The white god of war broke through the wind blowing down from the heavens, but it landed silently on the asphalt.

That god of war possessed the name of the storm dragon in Greek mythology and it drew a sword from its right shoulder.

It was coming, so two powers worked to fight back.

One was Hiba as he lay over Mikage. He threw the knife in his hand toward Tatsumi.

The other was Mikage as she ignored the pain in her right shoulder. She raised her right arm and…

"Keravnos!"

They worked in perfect unison.

Tatsumi would have to break her remote control of Typhon to brush aside the knife with her right arm and that would stop Typhon just long enough for Susamikado to use Keravnos as it appeared on its right arm.

Tatsumi chose to prioritize her own life and she grabbed the knife with her right hand.

Immediately afterwards, a heavy metallic sound rang out and the tip of Keravnos collided with Typhon's unmoving chest.

With a crash of destruction, the spear of light pierced through the white giant's chest and out the back.

White armor scattered through the air and an oil-like black liquid splattered everywhere.

After confirming the damage to Typhon, Hiba jumped forward.

He intended to attack Tatsumi.

He kicked off the edge of the sidecar and leaped above her head.

He pulled up his right leg so he could jab it down at Tatsumi as he

fell.

"…!"

He gave a yell, but one thing still bothered him.

*…Is this how she intends to settle things!?*

He had fought countless matches against her when she attended the Hiba Dojo under the name Miki.

She had excelled at turning aside and defending against attacks, so he had never once hit her.

However, he could manage it with his current timing.

He had jumped past the sword in her left hand and her right hand had just caught the knife.

He opened his mouth wide to brush aside his slight hesitation.

"This fight is already over! This one-sided and meaningless fight doesn't need to continue!"

He prepared to launch his right leg attack.

But just before he did, he saw an odd movement and heard an odd sound.

He saw Tatsumi suddenly let go of what she was holding.

She let go of the knife in her right hand and even the sword in her left.

"What?"

As he wondered what this meant, he heard her speak.

"That's right. I never told you the reason why you should fight me."

*There's no reason for that,* he immediately thought.

He was her fake, but that was her reason and it meant nothing to him.

But she continued to speak as he made his kick.

"When the enemy invaded Top-Gear, I was the one who drove your father to his death."

"…!?"

"In other words, I killed Hiba Ryuuichi, your father"

A moment later, he saw two things.

First, the fingers of Tatsumi's right hand moved slightly.

And second, a giant white fist flew toward him.

"How can Typhon still move after that hit from Keravnos!?"

Regardless, the uppercut performed by Typhon's right fist said all that needed to be said about its functioning state.

Hiba reflexively put up his guard, but the giant metal fist crashed into him as if to say his defenses were meaningless.

●

She had outdone him.

Several thoughts and decisions came to Hiba, but none of them produced words.

It seemed he was collapsed on the asphalt.

More than doubled over, he seemed to be bent into a Z-shape.

A few bones were broken, his muscles were trembling from the shock, and he was pretty sure he had torn some of those muscles.

However, he felt no pain and he had no sense of equilibrium. His vision wavered and was wet with tears.

He could neither inhale nor exhale, but his pulse raced and his vision grew dark from lack of oxygen.

But even as he fell into darkness, he turned his trembling gaze forward.

“No, Ryuuji-kun! Don’t get up!”

He could see Mikage who was sitting up while holding her right shoulder and he saw a white god of war beyond her.

The black god of war’s left arm and Keravnos were still pierced through Typhon’s chest, but it was still moving.

*…How can…it move?*

He heard Tatsumi’s voice as he trembled and forced himself up, starting with his butt.

“You don’t get it? Typhon doesn’t need a cockpit in the chest when it’s remote controlled, so I had it hollowed out as much as possible. …Surprised?”

Hiba was unable to response.

He simply swayed up and down, trembled left and right, and tried to stand.

“Ryuuji-kun!”

He could not respond to Mikage’s voice either. Instead, Tatsumi said more.

Her affected tone of voice made it clear she knew perfectly well he could not answer.

“Oh, dear. Keravnos seems to be stuck.”

She raised her left hand and Typhon forcefully raised its own left

hand.

As it rose, the inside of the bent elbow scooped up the elbow of Susamikado's extended right arm. That very same arm still had Keravnos inside Typhon.

"I expect you'll have reinforcements before long, so I'll be leaving."

Her words were accompanied by the sound of something breaking.

Susamikado's right elbow broke upwards and Keravnos was removed.

"…!"

Hiba's wavering vision saw Mikage's right arm jump up.

That arm was bent ninety degrees at the elbow. And it was bent the wrong way.

He distinctly heard her gasp.

Unable to hold on any longer, Hiba's vision moved forward as if tripping.

That was when his thoughts fully restarted. It was slow and awkward, but he was thinking.

*…I have to go.*

He did not know where or to do what. All he saw was a single charm placed on Keravnos as it stabbed into Typhon.

"Goodbye, Ryuuji-kun, Mikage-chan."

With Tatsumi's parting words, Typhon spread its wings.

She was going to escape, but Hiba's vision simply continued forward while shaking to the left and right.

*…I have to go.*

"No!"

He heard Mikage's trembling voice. He turned toward her and saw she was looking his way.

*…She's crying?*

*Why?* he wondered. *Oh, right,* he realized.

*…Does your broken arm hurt?*

*I'm sorry,* he thought. *I'm sorry, but I'm about to go protect you.*

He did not entirely understand. He did not entirely understand any of this.

A certain girl had been close to him long ago and he had treated her like his sister, but she had just said something strange.

She had claimed to have killed his father.

That was a lie. He knew it had to be a lie. That strong, strange, and perverted father could never have been killed.

He had to find out the truth.

*…And I have to protect Mikage-san.*

He was only six meters from where Mikage had landed. That felt like such a great distance and he kept feeling his knees just about give out, but he still continued forward.

"Mikage-san."

Something fell to the ground below his feet. It was not sweat. It was thicker than that and it was a dark red.

*But,* he thought. *Mikage-san is in a much worse state.*

He passed between Susamikado's legs and his vision darkened as he reached out toward Mikage.

He wanted to take her hand, pull her close, embrace her, and protect her in every way possible.

But suddenly, he realized he had stopped moving.

*…Huh?*

*Strange,* he thought.

His vision had not fallen yet and he should still be dragging his trembling legs forward.

*Why?* he wondered just before noticing what was stopping him.

A point of force was pushing back at the top of his chest.

That force had a short blade and a black grip.

It was a knife.

Tatsumi had thrown what he had thrown back at her and it had stabbed into the center of his sternum.

"Ah…"

*I need to go forward,* he thought, but his legs would not move.

He felt a weight in his knees and his vision dropped down.

His knees bent and reached the ground. He stretched his hand out toward Mikage, but it could not reach her.

However, that hand suddenly did reach her.

She stretched her left hand back toward him and their hands touched.

*…Eh?*

He looked up at her and saw her eyes were closed.

She was collapsing.

*Was it the pain in her right arm?* he wondered before seeing a certain color.

Dark red was seeping from her neck.

He looked up as she collapsed and the sky came into view.

With the dark winter sky in the background, a single giant sword split the heavens.

It was the sword in Typhon's right arm.

The tip of the sword pierced accurately through Susamikado's chest and neck. The blood on Mikage's chest came from her synchronization with the god of war.

A moment later, her body struck Hiba's.

A creaking sound came from his body as her broken right arm hit the knife stabbed into his chest and pulled it out.

As soon as he held her in his arms, he exhaled.

He let out the breath he had been holding this entire time.

"Kah!"

He expelled a mist of blood and carbon dioxide.

He felt the warmth of his and Mikage's blood on his chest.

His vision grew dark as he looked up into the sky.

Unable to support Mikage, he began to collapse backwards.

His upturned eyes saw Susamikado vanish.

The black giant instantly disappeared and Typhon's sword returned to the bottom edge of his vision.

Meanwhile, he tried to stop the blood flowing from Mikage's chest by holding her tight in his arms and he heard a voice.

"Thank you, Ryuuji-kun, Mikage-chan."

He heard a breath.

"Thank you…for being so weak."

"…!"

Just as a thought reached his mind, Hiba hit the asphalt with Mikage in his arms.

The impact shook his entire body, the back of his head struck the asphalt, and tears fell from his eyes.

He realized that Tatsumi's presence and Typhon's presence were gone.

He stared motionlessly into the night sky and cried as his vision fell into darkness.

"Kh…"

Still embracing Mikage’s unmoving body and still looking into the sky, his mind also sank into darkness.

# Chapter 10

## “A Comfortable Place”

I may be feeling down, but you’re full of energy
Even if it’s really annoying

●

A small six square meter room faced the east.

The fluorescent light on the ceiling had a Japanese-style cover and two people moved below it.

One was a woman in glasses and a blue kimono. The other was a girl in a gray kimono.

The two of them were laying out a futon in the room.

However, the woman in blue was having trouble getting the kimono in place and the girl in gray could not use her right leg well enough to fix it.

“Um, Ryouko? The sheet is out of place on your end.”

“Oh, sorry, Shi-chan. But don’t you think that’s the sheet’s fault?”

“No, I don’t see how it could be-… Anyway, how about I do it all?”

“You can’t. It would hurt the reputation of the Tamiya family.”

The girl in gray, Shino, looked at Ryouko.

Ryouko frowned as she stared at the sheet and groaned as she fixed its position.

“And we have to treat you right when Kouji of all people took you in.”

“Eh?”

Ryouko brought a hand to her chin and looked at the sheet’s position.

“He doesn’t have a tendency to take people in like I do, so someone like you is rare.”

“R-really?”

“I wonder why he took you in.”

“Well, um, I was lying injured on the road.”

“That’s too boring.”

She gave Shino a serious look and raised her right index finger.

“You have to at least say it’s because he has a thing for little girls! Otherwise it isn’t exciting enough.”

“I-I’m not that little!!”

“You’re right. We did take a bath together when you first got here.”

“Wah.”

That unexpected response made Shino lean back in surprise.

She had needed some assistance because of her broken leg, but

Ryouko had handled most of it. She could not let the leg get too warm, so she had started with only using the shower. However, Ryouko had often spoken to her from the bath. She had initially ignored the woman, but…

"You were so quiet, but you finally said something when I tickled you."

"B-but…"

"It's easier to talk than to stay silent, isn't it?"

Ryouko smiled.

"And you know what?" she continued. "Talking about what you decided not to say is a lot of fun. In an immoral way."

She spoke with a smile, but her tone was even sharper than with her previous serious expression.

Shino was a little surprised, but Ryouko's smile remained.

"Is everyone treating you well?"

"Eh? …Oh, yes. They're giving me plenty of food."

"Tch. They're all trying to get on your good side."

"Eh? D-d-did you say something!?"

"Don't worry about it, don't worry about it. But Shi-chan?"

Ryouko tilted her head while still smiling.

"Do you like it here?"

Shino was unsure what to say.

They had taken her in, they let her stay without asking anything, they made food for her, and lately she had helped with that too.

Kouji was indirectly inviting her to venture outside for rehabilitation, but she had not yet worked up the resolve to face the world, UCAT would be looking for her, and…

*…The others from the Army might find me.*

That kept her from wanting to head outside.

All those things kept her here, but on the emotional side…

"It isn't a bad place…"

*What do I think?* she wondered.

She had met Kouji, Ryouko, and other unique people here.

*…So what am I supposed to think about the people of this world?*

Before, she had thought about the school near this house and the lives of the people living in this area.

What was she supposed to think now?

*…I'm supposed to be their enemy.*

But she could not even say that and she could not join the others because she did not want Mikoku to push her away.

"…"

She had come to her own understanding of what Shinjou had said about her "graduating" from the Army.

*…My feelings are still with the Army, but I now belong here instead of with them.*

However, did that mean she was no longer part of the Army?

"——————"

That thought made her gasp and she felt a dull sweat on her back.

"Shi-chan?"

She was brought back to her senses by Ryouko's voice and the eyes leaning over like a cat to peer at her.

Her eyes focused and she saw Ryouko's face close enough to feel her breath.

"Sorry, Shi-chan."

"No, um, you don't have to…"

"But I do. I shouldn't have said something that got you so lost in thought. I forgot you're the serious type."

Ryouko brushed back her hair, laughed quietly, and narrowed her eyes.

"But you sure are cute. When you're worried about things, it shows on your face."

"P-please don't tease me. I'm trying to take this seriously."

"Wow, you're actually mad. I'm so happy."

Ryouko clapped her hands in joy, but Shino sighed and lowered her shoulders.

"I already knew I couldn't stand up to you…"

However, she then said "um" to begin a new question. She asked about the greatest reason for her mixture of relief and doubt concerning her current situation.

"Why are the people here so kind to me?"

"Why do you think?"

"I was asking because I don't know."

"I see." Ryouko glanced up at the ceiling. "It's because they're only interested in girls below the age of 15."

"Eek."

"Just kidding, just kidding."

"O-of course."

"Yeah, that's only a few of them. …Just kidding, just kidding. But I don't think they mean any harm, so go easy on them."

Shino wondered how she was supposed to "go easy" on them and she saw Ryouko smile bitterly.

"Well, I think it isn't really kindness if there's a reason for it. … Did you think we were showing you that 'other kind' of kindness? Did you think we were getting something out of it?"

Only then did Shino realize what her question had meant.

She sensed something nasty behind the thought that created the question.

"Sorry…"

"You're so cute, Shi-chan. That was a leading question."

"Eh?"

"You only asked if there *was* a reason. But when I asked what you thought, you had to start thinking *of* a reason, right?"

"Oh."

Shino was at a loss for words and Ryouko lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

"Sorry about that, Shi-chan. I should be the one apologizing. But make sure you only fall for that kind of thing when it's me. Otherwise you'll get abducted by some bad men."

"…"

A moment later, Shino felt a weight on her head. It was Ryouko's hand as she rubbed her head.

"And Shi-chan? Because of what happened to our family in the past, we make a point of helping people."

"In the past?"

"Yes," replied Ryouko. "It was the kindness of a complete stranger that allowed our family to survive."

"What happened to that stranger?"

"They died before we could thank them. Since my parents didn't know who to thank, they decided to be kind to everyone just in case it would reach that person somehow. That gave us a habit of being kind and…"

A quiet laugh reached Shino's ears.

"More recently in the past, I learned that the stranger had a granddaughter, but that granddaughter didn't know anything about

what had happened."

Shino thought about what that meant.

*…Ryouko knew something that person didn't.*

Shino felt she shared that trait.

And that made her wonder what Ryouko had done about that important fact.

Ryouko gave the answer before she could even ask.

"I never told her. If I had…it felt like it would have placed her above me."

"Th-then do you ever wish you had told her?"

The fact that she held such an important secret led Shino to ask, but…

"I don't know. Because no matter what I think now, there's no way I could have said it at the time."

Ryouko answered with a bitter smile, leaving Shino slightly dumbfounded. Shino had started leaning forward, so she straightened up.

"Do you not…regret it?"

"Hm? Of course I do. I didn't say it at the time, she ended up leaving for somewhere far away, and I was actually relieved by that fact. I regret every part of that and I seriously worried about it for a long time, but…"

Ryouko rubbed Shino's head again.

"Our young master brought back someone who had inherited that person's surname. The Tamiya family was finally able to give its thanks and repay them. After sixty years, we finally did it."

"Wait…"

Shino belatedly realized who Ryouko was referring to.

"You mean Shinjou, don't you?"

"Yes. And I would be happy if you could get along with our young master and Setsu-chan."

Ryouko finally let go of Shino's head.

She straightened up on the futon, smiled, and opened her mouth again.

"Are you listening?" she began. "If you're worrying about whether you should be here or not, remember that we don't mind at all. If there's a problem, it's on your end. Kouji, the others, and I don't care what kind of person you are. You may be a bad person,

you may have run away from home, there may be a search for you underway right this moment, and it may be a crime to keep you here, but… None of that matters as long as you do one thing in addition to getting along with our young master and Setsu-chan.”

“One thing?”

“Yes.” Ryouko nodded. “Don’t force yourself to do anything. Forcing yourself to do something is painful.”

She took a breath.

“And what you’re worrying about is your problem, so don’t hold it inside. You can’t make it someone else’s problem, so you should just do whatever it is you want to do. And…”

Ryouko said one last thing to Shino.

“I think you should be fine going with whatever answer that gives you.”

●

A ten square meter tatami mat room was prepared for a meal.

The round fluorescent light had a Japanese-style shade and a round table sat below it.

A girl in track shorts and a T-shirt was wiping off the table.

The chest of the T-shirt said Heo in magic marker.

“Harakawa, I’ve finished cleaning the table. I’ll go clean up the closet now, so you go take your bath.”

“You take your bath first, Heo Thunderson. I’m busy fixing our late dinner.”

She heard Harakawa’s voice and the sound of a knife on a cutting board coming from the kitchen.

He could not see her, but she still shook her head at his suggestion.

“A package should be coming for me soon.”

“You called UCAT after we left the school, didn’t you? What’s in the package?”

“A laptop.”

“I see. Then we’ll at least have to check it for bugs and hidden cameras.”

“You’re following a pretty strict set of rules, aren’t you?”

Heo’s shoulders drooped as she slid open the closet door.

“And Heo,” continued Harakawa. “Don’t tell me…”

"I'm only borrowing it. I didn't buy it or have someone give it to me."

As a freeloader, she made that clear up front.

"There's something I want to look into. …Back before November, Hajji of the Army explained how the world was made, remember?"

"What about it?"

"That's been bothering me. I don't really understand it all, but I can't help but wonder if that's really true or not."

"We do know that Top-Gear existed, so it must be true."

"Yes," agreed Heo while asking herself where this doubt came from if she thought it was true. "I'm not trying to say that explanation of the world's creation isn't true. But…it scares me to think it all happened the way Hajji said it did."

"Are you looking into it because you're scared? Are you borrowing a computer, running simulation after simulation, and wasting your time until you give up, Heo Thunderson?"

Harakawa's words briefly caused Heo's heart to shrink back.

She thought that was a more realistic way of looking at it than her own and she wondered if he would ever understand her worry.

"I don't want to give up. I want to be prepared."

To make sure he did not reject her opinion, she continued before he could say anything.

"I want facts to support the truth. I want to solidify our footing. After all, Top-Gear isn't our only opponent anymore. We have to speak to Low-Gear's crimes when facing the other Gears as well."

"That's not quite accurate, Heo. They aren't Low-Gear's crimes. They're our parents' crimes and they're crimes that never would have been found out if no one had said anything."

"Yes," agreed Heo, but she said nothing more.

She did not want Harakawa to reject her doubts or thoughts any further.

She had a feeling he would not accept a mere vague uneasiness.

*…I really should talk it out with him, though.*

She had nothing to support her doubts. She simply felt that something about it did not sit well with her. It could be nothing more than a desire to oppose Hajji for rejecting their world without giving them a chance to speak.

But she wanted to investigate it and find an answer she would

accept. And she did not want anyone to keep her from doing that.

With that in mind, she crawled into the closet. The bottom shelf acted as her bed and bedroom and the walls and floor were fully equipped with insulating mats now that winter had arrived.

She would sometimes hit her head on the top, so Harakawa had added a polyurethane cover.

She turned on the light to reveal a bookshelf filled with textbooks and other books and a shelf containing her clothes and other small belongings.

The drawing board she had originally used as a study desk had been added to the wall after Harakawa told her to maintain a proper posture while studying. She now used the living room table as a study desk, just like Harakawa did.

She pulled a board from between the books on the bookshelf.

It was a mirror of about A4 size and a photograph was held in the skinny wooden frame. It was from when she had won 1st place at the athletic festival race and accidentally ran over to Harakawa in the stands instead of lining up by the numbered flags.

She was satisfied that her current self in the mirror resembled the smiling self in the photo.

"…"

She returned the mirror to the bookshelf.

Her surroundings were dimly lit and the kitchen's sounds reached her.

The chopping had changed to the washing of a pot.

Harakawa always used cold water to wash the dishes and he never let Heo help.

She had yet to decide how to interpret that.

*…Should I help?*

But a sudden sound cut off her thoughts.

It was a cellphone.

Hers was sitting in the charger at the back of the closet, but Harakawa's was in his pocket.

Before she could climb further into the closet, the water stopped and there was a short pause for Harakawa to dry his hands.

"This is Harakawa. Heo's here too."

She heard him speak and then silently listen to something.

"…?"

Sudden confusion filled her as she crawled out onto the tatami mats.

*…Huh?*

She felt distinct unease in his silence.

There was a reason for that.

This silence came from complete motionlessness.

She knew Harakawa's habits when he listened to people, but she did not hear him cautiously crossing his arms or leaning up against anything to urge the speaker on.

What was UCAT telling him that warranted such silence?

*…Did someone else fight one of the other Gears like Kazami and Izumo did?*

But why would that make him so silent? He had received word of Izumo and Kazami's battles before heading out to the school, but he had still conversed with the caller then.

So where did this motionless silence come from?

"Um…"

Unable to endure the silence, Heo started to speak.

But at that exact moment…

"Understood. You take care of things there."

She heard Harakawa's voice from the kitchen and the sound of him putting plates in the sink to soak.

"Heo."

Hearing her name came as such a surprise that she found herself unable to respond.

"Can you hear me, Heo Thunderson?"

"Y-yes. What is it?"

"I have work to do. I'll be going to Yokota. Make and eat dinner on your own."

"Eh?"

*What is going on?* she wondered.

She had heard her cellphone ring too.

That call had been from UCAT, not from Harakawa's part-time job at the US base.

As if to answer her doubts, he left the kitchen. He balled up his khaki apron, tossed it toward the washing machine, and removed his leather jacket from the hanger by the entrance.

"Heo, let me tell you one thing. Until Sayama returns…no, until

Sayama returns and settles things with Top-Gear, don't get involved with the Leviathan Road."

She stiffened at that sudden command and he continued as he put on his jacket.

"You should stay away from the Leviathan Road altogether, Heo Thunderson."

●

After Harakawa verbally pushed her away, Heo breathed in yet did not lose her voice.

"I don't want to do that! Wh-what came over you all of a sudden!?"

He did not answer her reactionary shout. Instead, he picked up the keys sitting on the shoe-holder at the entrance.

The jingling of the keys sounded awfully cold among the living sounds of him dressing to go out.

So Heo got up from the floor.

"Harakawa! Please say something!"

"I'm saying it's dangerous, Heo Thunderson."

She thought she heard him sigh.

"Continuing with the Leviathan Road will create hatred directed at us. …Until now, all the hate was caused by what our grandparents or parents did, but from here on, it will be us they hate. Are you sure you want that?" he asked. "Is the power you were given meant to spread hate? Think carefully, Heo Thunderson."

"Think carefully? But about what?"

"Luckily, there are no survivors of 5th-Gear. You are the representative of 5th-Gear and its Concept Core is safely stored in the Vesper Cannon below UCAT. That gives no one a reason to attack you. …And as 5th-Gear's representative, you need to be protected, Heo."

So…

"If you stay put, you can avoid having anyone hate you."

As he spoke with his back turned, Heo realized two things.

"Someone was attacked, weren't they? And had their Concept Core taken."

The answer to her question was simple.

“You can stay in a safe place, so that is none of your concern, Heo Thunderson.”

He put on his shoes, sighed toward the floor, and gave an additional comment.

“There is nothing for you to do now. Taking any careless action would only put you in danger. …You understand, don’t you? This apartment is protected by the Americans, so don’t make their job any harder than it already is.”

“But-…!”

She tried to shout in protest, but he cut her off.

“Do you really think I don’t know you about the dreams that wake you up in the night?”

“…”

“Who is it that still has nightmares of Black Sun or the Army’s attack? Do you want to add more bad memories to the list? That isn’t a duty of yours. Would your parents have wanted that?”

“B-but without us, the others won’t have any large aerial firepower if there *is* a battle! Kazami can’t handle it all on her own.”

“But that would place the sins on your own back.”

He crushed her words and she could not deny what he was telling her.

But she still wanted to object, so she took a breath and a step forward.

“Why are you saying this all of a sudden? We’ve fought alongside the others until now!”

“Because I’ve realized doing that any more would be too dangerous. From here on, you would be accepting the world’s hatred.”

With his shoes on, Harakawa stood up and kept his back to her.

“This is no longer a battle against the hatred created by our grandparents or parents. This is about us changing the world ourselves. Heo, are you really prepared to do that just because someone you know is?”

She had no logical argument against his point.

It was true that the others were fighting as Team Leviathan, yet she could avoid being targeted herself.

Even her investigation of the world’s creation with that borrowed laptop was only for her own personal satisfaction.

So if possible, she should remain safely in UCAT as much as possible.

*…And try to head out only in an emergency.*

But that was definitely the plan of someone in a safe place.

And if she left that safe place, she would be placing hatred onto herself.

“So, Heo. Is your power truly necessary at the moment? There is no hatred directed at you, so are you really going to go out of your way to find some? Well?”

With that last word, Harakawa turned back toward her in the entrance.

She wanted to say something and stepped forward.

“———”

But no words left her.

The boy standing before her had his eyebrows slightly raised and a sharp look in his eyes.

*…He’s serious.*

He seemed to be telling her not to make any pointless arguments.

“But…”

Her words crumbled.

“Why are you trying to hold me back?”

Just before October, he had kept American UCAT from doing exactly that.

Instead of feeling satisfied at being holed up in a safe place, he had told her to go wherever she pleased.

That was why she was here in the first place.

“If I’m trapped here, I can’t go anywhere anymore.”

Even she knew that was an odd thing to say, but that was all she could say.

This was the only place she had and yet she was being imprisoned here.

She brought her trembling hands to her cheeks and felt tears spilling from her eyes.

“Why?”

She wiped the tears away as she asked.

“Why would you say that, Harakawa? You were the one who pushed me to go somewhere dangerous, so why are you holding me back now?”

“Think about that for yourself, Heo Thunderson.”

He stood up and looked at her without holding out his hand.

She felt like he was testing her, but in that case, what was he testing her for?

“Do you not want me here?” she asked.

His eyebrows moved a little at that.

“If that is what you think, then you can leave, Heo Thunderson. You might think you have nowhere to go, but you have plenty. You could go to Japanese UCAT or American UCAT. But…”

She listened to him.

“At the very least, this is not the kind of place you’re looking for.”

“Th-then where am I supposed to go!?”

“Pay attention, Heo. What do you think I’m doing right now?”

She looked to him, sniffed her runny nose, and saw him in his leather jacket.

She then remembered what his mother Yui had once said.

*…If he really did mind, he would leave on his own.*

What that meant reached her all the more because he had not told her himself.

And so her words came from deep in her heart.

“No…”

Not even she had expected herself to sound so dazed, but she still tried to step forward into the entranceway.

“N-no! If anyone…if anyone should leave, it’s me!”

If he left, she could no longer stay here.

And that would ultimately mean she would be trapped.

But he gave a single answer with his back turned.

“I’ll be back late. This job will probably take a while.”

Those words were accompanied by the chill of the winter night.

Harakawa opened the door and stepped out into the rectangle of night beyond it.

She tried to follow, but the outside air turned her breath white and her T-shirt and bike shorts were not enough to protect her.

Her trembling legs stumbled on the room’s divider frame.

“…!”

She tripped onto the entranceway floor just as the door closed.

“Ah.”

She bent her body and pushed herself up with both hands.

"Harakawa!"

The closed steel door bounced her words back at her.

She had been abandoned and left behind.

She had been left alone.

That meant…

*…He thinks I'm someone he can just leave behind. He doesn't care if I'm left alone.*

She wanted to think that was not true, but the sound of a motorcycle starting up said otherwise.

So she stood up. She grimaced at having fallen on her knees, but it was not an issue of any actual pain. There was a different, invisible pain coming from somewhere else.

A heavy, sinking, and inescapable feeling filled the bottom of her chest.

"Harakawa!"

She shouted for him not to leave her behind and stepped barefoot into the entranceway.

She turned the steel doorknob and prepared to push her body against the door to open it.

"Ah…"

But she heard the motorcycle driving off into the distance.

He was leaving. The sound of the engine shook the door and permeated her body, but it quickly faded away.

"Ah."

And it was gone.

It had completely vanished.

Even when she strained her ears and held her breath, she could not hear a thing.

*He's gone,* she thought.

However, she had no idea where to place that fact in her mind. She simply went limp and leaned against the door.

"No…"

The green door would not open. She removed her hands from the knob and covered her face.

She did nothing but raise her voice and cry.

She had been abandoned, she had been left behind, he was not coming back, this was all she had been to him, and she no longer knew what her life here had meant. All of that mixed together and

weighed on her heart.

"Ahh…"

She doubled over, slid down the door, and found her elbow had reached the cement. She had fallen onto her side in the entranceway.

She curled up, forcibly kicked away the shoes in the way of her body and legs, and cried some more.

"Why?"

She sobbed and let her covered face sink into the center of her curled-up body.

She then let out a trembling voice.

"Harakawa."

There was no response and she eventually stopped calling his name.

However, she did hear a sudden sound in the quiet entranceway.

"Eh?"

It answered her doubt by sounding again. This time, she realized it was a low and quiet rumbling.

It was her stomach growling.

●

"Uuh…"

Still crying and with her face red, Heo stopped moving.

However, her stomach did not care.

It quietly growled again as if asking for something.

So she got up and brought a hand to her stomach.

"H-honestly. Why do you have to do this now? Why when I'm feeling so down?"

She willed it to stop and gathered strength in her abs.

But it did not hesitate to growl again, so she sadly collapsed back onto the floor.

"Honestly… Does my body not know how to take anything seriously?"

Feeling ashamed of herself, she stretched out on the floor.

# Chapter 11

## “My Opinion”

She does not say that listening to her will make you cry
She says she will make you listen to her to make you cry
That is her confrontational tackle of a lifestyle

●

The meeting room was crowded.

The windowless underground space was filled with people and everyone save for the four in the center were standing, crossing their arms, and shouting.

One of the four looking watching those people was a maid.

“They are keeping up their energy quite well. I suspect they are producing too many narcotics in their brains.”

“You’re right,” replied Ooshiro.

He watched the people voicing countless protests inside that circular meeting room. No country had been set as the chair, so no one could stop the wave of anger. That allowed them to continue their protests and a certain result awaited them.

“Team Leviathan will lose.”

When Ooshiro stopped using ventriloquism and spoke casually, #8 turned to face him.

“Earlier, it seems Hiba-sama lost to Top-Gear and 3rd’s Concept Core was stolen.”

“Can you tell if the protests are centered on that now, #8-kun?”

“Testament. There are no protests concerning that. Why not?”

“Well,” began Ooshiro as he glanced toward Roger who slept next to him. “They are waiting for the proper timing. And…do you understand what the loss of 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core means to the foreign UCATs?”

“Testament. If even one of them is lost, the Leviathan Road cannot be completed and they can claim Team Leviathan cannot be trusted. Thus…”

At that point, a loud sound filled the meeting room.

Someone had clapped their hands. The single sound held enough dignity to quiet the previous wave of anger.

It had come from the seat ten meters directly in front of Ooshiro.

“You are from Chinese UCAT, aren’t you? What is it? Do you have something to say?”

“I do.”

A man in black rested his elbows on the desk in front of him and spoke in Chinese.

He was a middle-aged man with narrow eyes and his black hair

tied back.

Ooshiro had previously noted that chair was vacant, but this man had appeared at some unknown point and he was now smiling.

“I believe you know the general situation.”

He took a breath and waited in silence for three seconds.

“It seems 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core was stolen by a Top-Gear assassin.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a stir ran through his surroundings. Some gave shouts of surprise and a few toppled backwards in their chairs.

#8 looked across them all.

“Are all UCATs obsessed with overreacting, are they all terrible actors, or are they all idiots? I have high hopes for that last option. Especially when limited to you, Ooshiro-sama.”

“I’d love it if you gave an option 4: they all like to play along.”

However, three more claps quieted everyone down again.

“He’s certainly in control here,” muttered Ooshiro as he looked to the Chinese UCAT representative.

“What do you have to say?”

“Well,” began Ooshiro while crossing his arms. “To be blunt, does any UCAT really think it can defeat a three-way alliance between Japanese UCAT, American UCAT, and German UCAT?”

“Oh?”

Chinese UCAT’s response slowly brought in a heavy atmosphere.

The man leaned forward a bit and crossed his arms.

“A monarchy does not use its full military might to crush a small nation, but if you insist, I believe committing such a foolish act could be deemed reasonable.”

“And what nation is this monarchy you refer to?”

“I refer to the nation that will carry in the next generation. I refer to everything.”

“Then that wouldn’t just be your nation. …So what are all of you going to do, other nations? We had one Concept Core taken, but we’ve still got the other nine.”

Ooshiro looked around while asking his question.

“If you try to get along with us, your good friend Kazuo might just help you out a little.”

The air shook as someone exhaled and everyone’s gazes and

focus turned back to Chinese UCAT.

However, the Chinese UCAT representative ignored all of them. In doing so, he regained a position from which to speak his mind freely.

“Japanese UCAT had 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core stolen, so who has given you the rights for any of that? Our top priority is to settle the rights to the Concept Cores and store them in a safe place.”

“Then what are you going to do about 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core? I know you don’t have a god of war or anything else that can hope to battle Typhon effectively.”

“That is simple,” he answered. “Japanese UCAT and Team Leviathan will be broken up and brought under our command.”

“…”

“Japanese UCAT has a god of war which can fight Typhon and Team Leviathan has 5th’s strongest mechanical dragon. …We will form a fighting force around them.”

He took a breath, crossed his arms on the desk once more, and calmly continued.

“Japanese UCAT has too much power. Not only that, it has misused that power, let the bearers of that power run freely, and mistaken its goal. …We understand that, so we will not make the same mistake. We will use strength as strength and we will handle the command and implementation ourselves.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” muttered Ooshiro.

However, he spoke so quietly only #8 noticed.

She nodded and replied just as quietly.

“On very rare occasions like this, I do agree with you, Ooshiro-sama. It was not the bearers of power that we let run freely. It was the will of a villain.”

“Yes.”

Ooshiro smiled bitterly and his shoulders shook.

He noticed that Roger had woken at some point and the man also nodded at #8’s comment. Past him, Diana gave a small smile with her eyes closed.

As long as they had that mutual understanding, there was just one thing to say.

Ooshiro lifted his head and looked the Chinese UCAT representative in the eye.

"I doubt our opponents would play along if we used your method. After all, none of you are active participants."

"That's right," agreed Diana as she turned her usual smile toward her surroundings. "Who here was involved in the battle that destroyed Top-Gear ten years ago?"

No one in the meeting room raised their hands.

When Diana saw that, a quiet laugh escaped her throat.

"Top-Gear may be hoping for a fight, but it is not with you. Do you understand why they stole the Concept Core?"

The witch inhaled and pulled out an extra-large megaphone she had made from paper.

The word "loud" was written on it.

"They wanted a ticket onto the stage where they can take vengeance for their grudge!!"

●

The loud voice filled the meeting room and broke one of the lights on the ceiling.

As the shards of the white light poured down on the center of the room, most of the people inside covered their ears, but Roger noticed that the Chinese UCAT representative did not budge.

The man then opened his mouth.

"But if we locate them and challenge them, we will have an overwhelming advantage in resources. And their reasons do not matter as long as we defeat them."

"Oh?" said Roger with a nod.

*What a troublesome man,* he thought while crossing his arms and legs.

"I am not… I am not so sure. I will say it twice as a good-luck charm and to show I am serious. And…if Top-Gear's reasons do not matter as long as they are defeated…"

He continued.

"Are you saying that Top-Gear is such a small group that you can wipe them out here and leave no trace of their grudge behind?"

He held out his right hand, pulled a small bottle from the sleeve, and placed it on the desk.

"This is some of my dream sand. Do you know what sand it uses?"

There was no answer to his question, so he pushed his glasses up

his nose and gave the answer.

"Top-Gear's sand. This sand will give you a dream of Top-Gear's final hours. If you are so focused on retrieving the Concept Core that you refuse to face Top-Gear's grudge…"

"You will use that sand's power to show us the past and accuse us of being unfair for making this decision without knowing what happened during that battle?"

The Chinese UCAT representative uncrossed his arms and placed his hands on the desk.

"But the present problem is that all of you are acting on your own far too much while using the past as a shield. Even if you put together a plan for retrieving 3rd-Gear's Concept Core, I doubt any UCAT will give their approval."

"In other words, no matter how much we complain, you will refuse to accept it and even block any progress we might make?"

"We are not blocking progress. We are stopping your selfish actions before you begin down the wrong path once again. Our first priority is retrieving 3rd-Gear's Concept Core. And that…"

Roger saw the man raise his right hand and point to his surroundings.

"That is something I imagine every UCAT except for yours can agree to. So you can fall under our command. If you assist us in retrieving the Concept Core, I am sure we can get along once more."

"And if we refuse? What happens then?"

"All of the world's military force will be immediately sent to Japan's various UCATs."

Just as Roger internally gasped at that, he heard Ooshiro raise his voice to the left.

"An invasion of Japan? If you do anything that noticeable, it will lead to war. Are you okay with that?"

Next to him, #8 stared at their opponent and spoke to him.

"Ooshiro-sama, based on my calculations of their military power versus our own…"

"But Team Leviathan would survive, wouldn't they?"

"Testament. Sayama-sama and the other primary members of Team Leviathan would be unable to fully destroy the armies of the world's UCATs, but those armies would be unable to capture them

and they would have no way of opposing Thunder Fellow."

Once she completed her calculations, Roger, Ooshiro, and Diana listened to the result.

"In such a scenario, I believe Japanese UCAT would be destroyed, but Team Leviathan would survive and continue to fight."

●

#8 spoke to Ooshiro who had requested her preliminary calculation.

"Simply put, Team Leviathan cannot be brought under their control."

"Then that's fine."

Ooshiro's tone was casual and he showed off his shining teeth with a smile. They really did shine.

*A disturbing trick,* thought #8 as she backed away and faced him again.

"Testament. An excellent decision. I am sure Sayama-sama would be delighted to hear it."

They both faced forward once more and the Chinese UCAT representative looked back.

The man must have heard them because he sighed and nodded.

"I see. I would not have it any other way. After all…"

He leaned back in his chair and shrugged.

"Simply having you handle it all, leaves nothing for us. So fighting a war and putting ourselves at the top wouldn't be bad."

"But I believe only we can fulfill their grudge," pointed out Ooshiro.

#8 mentally nodded. She could indeed determine that the other Gears would not have listened to them without Team Leviathan.

Her memory of being carried for the first time was still fresh.

But if it happened a second time or third time, she would likely grow accustomed to it and the memory's priority level would drop.

*…And the other UCATs have nothing like that.*

But the other man replied.

"We can deal with that grudge somehow."

He snapped the fingers he had used to point at them.

The snap was accompanied by another noise: the bottle of sand in front of Roger burst.

#8 visually detected the bullet. There was a sniper to the right of the top level.

Roger frowned, but the man in black spoke before Roger could open his mouth.

“Listen. The quickest method of eliminating a grudge is to snuff it out without taking any notice of the past. And yet you are trying to learn more about the past, which has unearthed truths detrimental to you and even led to the discovery of Top-Gear. …That is nothing but more trouble for us.”

“So you’re saying…”

“We will not accept any grudges. We may accept them in this generation and we may even discuss them, but afterwards, we will have them join this world, we will leave no records, we will eliminate any records of what happened in the past, and we will reject any accusations. That is the quickest method of ridding the world of grudges.”

He smiled bitterly.

“While we are at it, we might as well record only the damage we took and request compensation for that. After all, they will have no way of determining if our proof is fabricated or not. …And by then, we will already rule the world.”

“That’s playing really dirty.”

“But we will be the only ones to do that. Afterwards, thousands and tens of thousands of years will pass and our descendants will know nothing of this! We stand at an important crossroads for our descendants. If we forget that and let our emotions get the better of us, we will have lost.”

He raised his hands.

“Now, come join us, you three foolish UCATs. Join us as global rulers for the next ten thousand years. …And to begin, how about we take back 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core!? Let’s take it back!”

As soon as he said that, a young female voice filled the meeting room.

“Wait, wait, wait. I don’t know what’s going on here, but it sounds exciting.”

The door behind Ooshiro’s group opened and wind blew in.

A few sets of footsteps entered and the crowd gasped.

They were all giving off an aura of surprise and fear that whoever

this was had heard what was said.

However, the footsteps showed no concern for any of that.

“Honestly, what is this? I heard something about taking back 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core, but how can you talk about that while ignoring us?”

#8 looked over and saw an unfamiliar person in a lab coat standing next to her.

However, she had heard of this person from Gyes, so she was able to call her name.

“Miyako-sama?”

“That’s right,” answered Miyako as she stared across the entire meeting room. “I’m 3rd-Gear Representative Tsukuyomi Miyako! I heard our Concept Core’s been taken, so I stopped by for a quick chat.”

●

Miyako frowned, turned toward #8, and looked the automaton in the eye.

“Hm? I haven’t seen you before. Are you from the group here?”

“Testament. I am #8. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“I see.” Miyako gave Ooshiro a look of pure contempt. “It must be tough dealing with this old man.”

“Testament. But rather than tough, I would call it…baffling.”

“M-Miyako-kun, #8-kun. Please don’t start abusing the elderly as soon as you meet each other!!”

“Shut up or I’ll tell everyone what I learned from my mom. For example, I know you put IAI’s name on the receipt when you buy perverted games!! You’re just awful. I didn’t like the shape of your ears from the moment I saw you in my interview.”

“Please wait just a moment, Miyako-kun!!”

“I said shut up.” She crossed her arms. “And what’s this ‘merchandise’ nonsense? Well? If you’re a man, put the title on there with your real name!”

“B-but the store clerks ask what company name I want to put down!”

“Then correct them! ‘What company name should I put down?’ ‘No, please put it under Ooshiro Kazuo!’ And if they ask ‘Would you like the product listed simply as merchandise?’, smile and tell them

‘No! Put it down as an 18+ game!’ ”

“M-Miyako-kun, what would you do if your husband was that refreshingly shameless?”

“What? Apollo wouldn’t buy things like that.”

“Waaahh!! This girl is living in a fantasy world!!”

“C’mon, don’t give me a girly compliment like that. I’m gonna blush.”

While she shoved Ooshiro to the floor to hide her embarrassment, #8 bowed toward Moira 1st and 2nd who stood behind her.

Moira 1st smiled and placed a hand on her cheek.

“You are doing very well, I see.”

“Testament. I have determined that is thanks to your former guidance. I can now look after an old man like this…although I have determined that is not exactly a good thing.”

“N-now #8-kun and Moira 1st-kun are turning their reunion into abuse of the elderly!!”

“Shut the hell up, old man.”

Miyako was obviously in a bad mood and her comment led Ooshiro to sit below the desk and pretend to cry.

Ignoring him, Miyako looked around and put a hand in her lab coat pocket.

“Honestly.”

After seeing what had just happened, the representatives flinched back in fear when her gaze reached them.

She frowned even more when she noticed.

“What’s that for? Am I that scary!? I can’t believe this… I won’t get mad, so tell me the truth. Am I that scary?”

After a while, they exchanged a glance and hesitantly nodded.

“I see.” Miyako nodded. “Well, don’t judge a book by its cover, you bald old men!!”

As they shrieked and flinched back again, Ooshiro poked at her lab coat.

“E-excuse me, Miyako-kun. Taking command here is fine and all, but what do you want?”

“This came in during the day. Ruined my plans of watching the winter special ‘Mito Kimon – Two-Hour Rampage’.”

She pulled out an origami crane with “Winter Yokosuka” written on the wings.

She stuffed it back in her pocket without noticing Diana's feigned ignorance.

"It took a while to search this place out, but what do you think you're doing!?"

Her outburst caused the surrounding representatives to flinch back again.

All except for one, that is.

A man in black leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. He was the Chinese UCAT representative and he spoke in Chinese.

"So you are 3rd-Gear's-…"

"What!? I don't know what you're saying! Speak in Japanese!"

The man was dumbfounded and Miyako swung her right leg.

Her visitor's slipper instantly flew toward him. With perfect aim, it struck the edge of his desk and flew up into the air.

As the solid sound filled the room, she pulled back her leg.

"I heard a bit of what you said before. A lot of it sounded pretty suspicious, but that doesn't matter. I'm just a part-timer, so all this internal UCAT mess isn't my concern."

She placed her bare right foot on the floor next to her slippered left foot.

"But if it's about 3rd, you've gotta run it by me first."

"Then the UCATs of each nation will-…"

"I said to speak Japanese, you moron!!"

Her roaring voice caused the Chinese representative to frown.

However, she gave a triumphant laugh, looked right at him, and deeply crossed her arms.

"Oh, so you do understand Japanese. Then get to speaking it."

"Why are you forcing me to speak that lang-…"

"I have no idea what you're saying. And let me tell you something: I'm 3rd's representative right now, so Japanese is 3rd's standard language. Isn't that right, Moira 1st?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

"U-um, Miyako-kun. It isn't normal Japanese to say 'yes, sir' to a woma- No, I mean…what a wonderful ladies' language that is!"

"Glad to see you understand."

She turned away from Ooshiro and smiled.

"You were saying something about needing to take back 3rd-Gear's Concept Core to gather the UCATs together properly,

weren't you? But you know what? I never asked you to do that."

She gave her conclusion.

"I can't trust any of you."

●

Miyako sat on the desk in front of Ooshiro.

She crossed her legs and raised her right hand.

"Yes, sir."

Moira 1st partially removed the wrapping of a chocolate cigarette and set it between Miyako's fingers.

Miyako placed the contents in her mouth.

"Y'know?"

Everyone shrank back, but she no longer cared.

"What are you all afraid of? You're adults, aren't you? You're men, aren't you? You're productive members of society, aren't you!?"

She glared at them and they shrank back further, but by then, she was only looked straight ahead.

Her eyes were fixed on the Chinese UCAT representative.

He folded his hands atop his desk.

"What do you intend to do?"

"So you're finally speaking Japanese, huh?"

She smiled and grabbed the edge of the desk on either side of her butt.

"But I'm the one that wants to know what *you* intend to do. What are you gonna do with 3rd's Concept Core?"

"We wish to gain Japanese UCAT's assistance in retrieving it."

"I like the sound of that. Especially the blatant ulterior motive hidden below it."

She kicked her dangling legs below the desk.

"What are you all thinking? Listen, who was 3rd's Concept Core stolen from?"

"The Team Leviathan god of war belonging to the girl named Mikage."

"And can you tell me what Gear Mikage is from?"

"3rd-Gear…"

The man trailed off and Miyako raised her right hand to point at him with the chocolate cigarette.

"Then we can say this, can't we? 3rd's Concept Core wasn't stolen from Team Leviathan. It was stolen from Mikage of 3rd. That makes this 3rd's responsibility, not Team Leviathan's."

"That is nothing but sophistry!!"

"As 3rd's representative, I get to judge any issue with 3rd's Concept Core or 3rd's people! There's no sophistry in a kind and fair judgment to accept responsibility for one of your own! …You're the outsiders here!!"

She clicked her tongue and jabbed the chocolate toward the man.

"Besides, what's this 'nothing but sophistry!' nonsense? Don't think everyone's just going to accept what you say if you use some fancy word. 3rd's Concept Core has always been ours, so why are you acting like it's yours? I'll call the cops on you!!"

"But in that case…"

The man in black frowned slightly.

"We will hold 3rd responsible for the loss of the Concept Core."

"And?"

She shrugged and the man furrowed his brow.

"Then let me make this clear: you must take full responsibility for your failure to manage the Concept Core."

"Then let me make *this* clear: 3rd-Gear left the Concept Core with Mikage as our representative and sent her to Team Leviathan for the Core's safekeeping," explained Miyako. "But since it was stolen, we request that Team Leviathan takes responsibility. We request that they negotiate with Top-Gear and retrieve the Core."

"…"

"To sum up, you all are the ones getting in the way."

She got down from the desk.

"3rd and Team Leviathan can settle this between ourselves. I'm the most pissed that the Core was stolen and it belongs to me. …So who's the rudest one here? Who's the one ignoring people's rights to their family's Concept Core and acting like they own it?"

She crossed her arms, looked across all of them, and gave a fearless smile.

"You're in the way and I can't trust you. It isn't Japanese UCAT or any other UCAT that 3rd-Gear trusts. We trust in the Leviathan Road itself!"

She took a breath.

“Besides, how can you ask American, German, and Japanese UCAT to take responsibility? None of you shed any blood helping fight in the past. That makes this an issue between those three UCATs. They may have hidden the truth from the other Gears, but as long as we don’t complain, they don’t owe anyone anything for that.”

“…”

“Who was it that decided to meddle in our business and grill those three UCATs over this? If you’re gonna grill anyone, make it that old man behind me.”

“M-Miyako-kun! Are you using me for a noble sacrifice!?”

“You don’t refer to a sandbag as a sacrifice.”

Ooshiro pretended to cry again, but she ignored him and continued speaking.

“Listen. We’ll only talk through the Leviathan Road and I’m sure Top-Gear’s the same. So if you want to act so mature and full of yourself while you stick your nose in our business…”

She swung her left leg to send her other slipper flying forward.

“Take this and cool your head!!”

But as soon as the slipper took flight, a sound joined it.

“!”

Her slipper exploded in midair.

She frowned at the sound of bursting fabric and took a step back.

The man in black had raised his right hand at some point and he did not lower it.

“I would prefer not to use this method.”

“A sniper? …Are you insane? I’m 3rd’s representative.”

“I came here prepared to dirty my name. …My country is strict about our work.”

He smiled bitterly as if to say he had no choice.

“And you are originally from Low-Gear, so you are only 3rd’s representative by pure luck.”

“It wasn’t luck, you idiot. A lot of hard work went into that.”

“U-um, Lady Miyako? You can praise Moira 2nd if you want, but, uh, that is indecent.”

“Don’t be silly. Having kids isn’t indecent, so baby-making is perfectly decent.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Moira 1st despite tilting her head in confusion

over whether to accept that or not.

Miyako sighed, faced forward, and placed a hand on her stomach.

"Simply put, do you see no meaning in letting 3rd live on?"

"We are not bringing emotion into the equation. We will simply eliminate anything that stands in the way of our benefit," he said. "And what about this? Below Izumo UCAT, the cockpit containing the body and soul of 3rd's king is stored inside and protected by a blue god of war, but that is proof that you believe he is the true king. …In that case, surely you have some reservations in calling yourself 3rd's representative."

"It's the wife's job to look after the house when her husband's away. That's pretty basic."

"Even if that could bring ruin to the 'house' that is 3rd?"

"Every woman wants to hear she's beautiful enough to cause the fall of a great kingdom."

"Then we must nip that fall in the bud before it reaches Low-Gear as well."

She smiled bitterly at his decisive tone of voice.

"It must be tough playing your role. Now express that feeling in Chinese."

"Thank you."

"Yeah, that's it, that's it." She went on to mimic his tone of voice. "Xie xie. …Now look to the side."

The man in black turned right.

He found something floating in empty air there.

"A handgun…"

Everyone else also looked to the side or behind.

A handgun was floating right next to each of them and aiming at their head.

"…!?"

They all realized those were the handguns they themselves had brought for self-defense.

Moira 1st stepped to the side behind Miyako.

A maid with short blonde hair stood in the space she revealed.

"Well done, Moira 2nd. Multiple parallel operations with gravitational control are really your thing."

Moira 2nd nodded expressionlessly and Ooshiro spoke up from next to Miyako.

“Miyako-kun, why is there a sniper rifle floating next to me?”

“Oh, we had one extra after taking that from the sniper. Moira 2nd, if you need to fire one as a warning, use this one. That’ll make a good example.”

“How cruel can you be!?”

“Shut up,” she said before facing forward again.

Ahead of her, the Chinese UCAT representative was frowning in her direction.

“Surely you aren’t going to call this unfair,” she said. “It’s the same method you used. And if this is the language you use to negotiate, then you lost this negotiation to 3rd.”

“…”

She received silence in response, so she suddenly snapped her fingers.

“!?”

The solid sound from her fingers was only a sign, but everyone assumed it was a gunshot.

After being designated the warning, Ooshiro was the fastest to react.

“My life is flashing before my eyes!! And in 2D!!”

However, the next sound was different.

It was the sound of cloth hitting a surface.

“What?”

The man in black looked upwards.

Something had hit his head and produced the previous sound.

“That’s a slipper. The first one I kicked bounced upwards, remember?”

Miyako smiled as she explained what the sound and the object on the man’s head were.

“After it flew upwards, Moira 2nd held it near the ceiling with her gravity, but no one noticed. Everyone was too focused on the meeting…or rather, our exchange.”

“I see.” The Chinese representative’s cheeks twisted a little. “We had lost the calm needed to negotiate as far back as that.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she corrected. “It wasn’t that you did a bad job. …We’re just better than you.”

“I see,” he said again.

He then sighed and removed the slipper from his head.

He pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket, wrapped the slipper in it, and placed them in his pocket.

“So 3rd-Gear wishes for Team Leviathan to resolve this issue, is that correct?”

“It is. And remember one thing: the other Gears are challenging and negotiating with Team Leviathan right now. That means we’ll only take our fight to the group that’s actually looking at us. We’re all picky like that. So unfortunately…all of you are just in the way.”

She sighed, crossed her arms, looked across everyone there, and opened her mouth again.

“If only you’d been looking at us instead of the Concept Core.”

She did not stop there.

“After all, my husband was looking at me.”

# Chapter 12

## “Consumed Heat”

That resistance is much like being patient
That is why you find yourself unable to stop

●

The moon shined bright that night.

The moonlight filled a certain large yard.

The yard belonged to a large house. It was a calm place with trees and a pond.

However, the electric lights inside the yard's lanterns revealed a certain form.

It was Shino, a kimono-wearing girl who walked awkwardly with a cane.

She walked along the wall or the fence surrounding the large but earthen yard.

This was part of the rehabilitation for her right ankle, so she held her left hand against the fence or wall as she walked.

The nearby guard dogs turned toward her, but she only smiled and walked by.

A single circuit of the yard took about half an hour.

She did this at morning, afternoon, and night and she found it the most relaxing part of her day.

Lately, her routine was to take some time to think in the bath afterwards.

However, her thoughts today were different from normal.

*…A lot happened today.*

She thought back to the feeling the conversation with Shinjou had given her.

And…

"Ryouko said I should do whatever I want."

But she did not know what she should do.

She could relax here yet felt guilty for staying here, so what was she supposed to do? She asked that question again and again.

*…What if I ran away?*

She revisited that hypothetical for the umpteenth time and suddenly stopped to look at the yard.

How would she run away if she wanted to?

The yard had surveillance devices disguised as lanterns and human sculptures, but she could tell what areas they covered by observing the movements of the dogs. She had been trained in this sort of thing while in the Army.

But the problem was the Tamiya house's front gate. The large front gate and the back gate both had electronic security devices installed to keep Ryouko from sneaking out to buy snacks.

The top of the fence also had sensors attached, but Shino's leg kept her from climbing the fence in the first place.

*…I can't run away.*

If she wanted to leave, she could always say goodbye and leave.

"But…"

At the moment, she had nowhere to go.

Kouji and the others would likely ask about that and would stop her from leaving once they found out she had nowhere to go. She could not lie to them. That was the kind of people they were, but that was exactly why she was so thankful for their presence. They were willing to worry for a complete stranger like her.

*…In that case, I could always use the cover of night to…*

She ended that thought and corrected her posture.

She asked herself why she was trying to run away.

"I would only be worrying them all the more."

And even if she did make it through the front gate, she could not escape. If she left without saying anything, they would immediately notice and tail her.

*But,* she thought.

*…Is that what I want right now?*

That question surprised her and a sudden sound reached her from the side.

"————!"

One of the dogs howled and caused her to drop her cane.

*Ah,* she thought as the cane fell on the guard dog's head.

The dog shrank back and she frantically spoke up.

"S-sorry. You're Pes, aren't you?"

But Pes grabbed the cane in its mouth. It must have thought that was Shino's harsh way of showing affection because it wagged its tail as if saying "Again! Again!"

Shino gave a troubled groan, crouched down with a hand on the fence, and started to grab the cane.

As she did, she noticed a hole at the bottom of the fence where the light of the lanterns did not quite reach.

"What is this?"

The hole was cleverly hidden by a tree and some leaves, but it was large enough for someone to crawl through and one branch had a small scrap of cloth caught on it.

Shino recognized the red and faded cloth.

"That's from Ryouko's kimono. Is this how she escapes to buy snacks?"

She gasped, grabbed the cane, and quickly left with Pes.

She knew she had discovered something she was better off not knowing about. In more ways than one.

●

Heo moved silently in the light.

The corners of her eyes were a little red and her eyebrows were raised.

However, her mouth was twisted into a shallow frown like she was putting up with something.

"What is with Harakawa!? Really, really what is with him!?"

She was doing the exact opposite of what she had done before. Instead of cleaning or organizing, she was making a mess.

In the center of the room, the table was sitting across Harakawa's spread futon and it contained all the bags of snacks they had stocked up on.

The TV was left on, books from the closet were sitting in the corner, and the mirror she had been hiding was sitting on the table and facing her.

"Harakawa said to do whatever I wanted, so…so that's what I'll do. Starting today, I'll mess up my normal lifestyle. I'll eat snacks after brushing my teeth and watch late night TV."

She looked at the futon laid out below her butt. It was white, but…

"A-and I'll sleep in Harakawa's futon! Th-this is revenge for making me sleep in that cramped closet all the time!"

But once she remembered her change of clothes was in the closet, she climbed in to retrieve them.

After a while, she found she had searched out a book in the closet bookshelf and comfortably curled up next to the closet wall.

"Ah! Wh-when did I get so pathetic?"

She quickly crawled out of the closet and looked around.

“Um, wh-what else am I not supposed to do? I can read manga in bed and…”

She went to the kitchen and took two things from the refrigerator. She and Harakawa had bought the first item on sale at the supermarket.

“I-I’ll eat this two-person cake all on my own!”

She checked the number of calories on the seal sticker and then checked the expiration date. It expired the following day, so it had likely been on such a good sale because it was about to expire.

*…S-someone has to eat it before it expires. That’s enough of an excuse.*

She then turned to the other item she had placed on the table.

“Beer.”

It was made by IAI and the can pictured a nude Daikokuten striking a bold pose with the morning sun hiding his crotch. It was known as Daikoku Beer and the ads saying “The God of Fortune Stands on the Earth” were famous.

“Underage drinking is proof you’re a delinquent.”

She grabbed the pull tab, took a deep breath, and realized this was the moment to make up her mind.

“Th-this is Harakawa’s fault. He left for the base without saying why and told me to do whatever I wanted. He…He thinks I can’t do anything or won’t do anything, doesn’t he? W-well, I’ll show him and become a delinquent. If he’s going to be a delinquent and push me away, then I’ll become a delinquent too and I won’t let him in if he comes back.”

But as she said that, her expression suddenly fell apart.

“But he will come back, won’t he?”

She almost started to cry, so she shook her head to hold back.

*He wouldn’t just never come back,* she told herself.

But if he did come back and she was the same as always, she had a feeling he would reject her again.

But she did not know what to do to keep him from rejecting her.

*…So I just have to become a delinquent like him.*

However, he was quite the delinquent. He watched late night TV, he drove a motorcycle, and he drank beer. It would be difficult for her to develop into an even greater delinquent in such a short time, but she had to do it. She had to become enough of a delinquent to

shock him.

"In terms of units, I'll be a mega delinquent!"

She kept her thoughts positive and decided to cross the starting line with the beer.

She gathered strength in the finger on the pull tab and prepared to open it.

But something stopped her.

"…?"

She heard a bell.

She tilted her head at the quiet sound coming from beyond the front door.

*…Is it a cat?*

Cats would sometimes stop by the apartment. Harakawa never fed them, but they still seemed to like him for some reason.

But this was a winter night. Any cat wearing a bell would be inside their warm home.

Still tilting her head, Heo stood and tiptoed over to the door.

She was worried it might be a robber, but the American UCAT guards were hiding outside.

*…So it must be the laptop I asked for.*

After reaching that conclusion, she unlocked the door and slowly opened it.

The night opened up before her eyes.

"————"

The chilly air he had disappeared into enveloped her body and she briefly shrank back.

But then she saw two cardboard boxes sitting at the entrance.

One was stacked atop the other and they were both fifty centimeters square. They were bound with white paper thread and…

*…An origami crane.*

That was Diana's origami and the crane's neck had a small bell attached.

"Did this crane bring the boxes?"

She could hardly believe it, but the two boxes were more than enough to tell her what had happened.

The stacked boxes were as tall as her waist and…

*…The bottom box has an invoice for the laptop?*

The bottom one contained the laptop she had asked for to help her investigation. 2nd-Gear's Kashima of the development department had likely prepared it for her. It was wrapped in dangerous looking paper printed with the Heart Sutra.

*…Then what's the top one?*

If Diana had arranged this, what could it be? Did it contain books for her studies?

Confused, Heo reached down to undo the paper thread binding the boxes.

However, the paper thread came undone on its own before she could touch it.

It moved like a snake to come apart and spread out around the boxes.

"Ah."

She reflexively pulled her hand back in the chilly night air and the white light of the entranceway. The packing tape on the top box also peeled off on its own.

It started on her end and peeled back away from her while rolling itself up. Once the sound of it tearing from the box ended, the lid opened.

Heo saw something inside the cardboard box push up the lid.

She was unable to react, so she only managed to take a single step back.

"What's in there?"

Her eyes opened wide as she watched something poke out of the opened box.

She recognized what placed its front legs on the edge of the box and looked out at her.

"Heo? Doing well?"

A voice reached her in the form of a thought.

"A 4th plant creature?"

"Yes."

The plant creature nodded from within the box.

"Talk with Heo. Very good thing."

After the span of a breath, the creature continued.

"4th will redo negotiation. With Heo this time. Okay?"

●

The corridor was very cold.

It was a long windowless corridor made of cement. It curved a bit to the left, but only enough to prevent one from seeing farther than twenty meters down it.

The plumbing was exposed on the walls and a bench was located below a water pipe covered in condensation.

A boy breathed a white breath from that bench.

The black-haired boy had the slightly dark skin of someone with Latin blood.

He wore a leather jacket and faced a single door.

The door contained a placard that said “United States Yokota UCAT Commander” in English.

People in blue armored uniforms would occasionally walk between the boy and the door.

They would all give the boy a puzzled look, but after realizing who he was, they would give a quick salute and pass by.

The boy would nod uncomfortably back at them.

“Harakawa. Harakawa Dan, come in.”

The boy stood when a sudden voice called for him from the door’s communicator.

He straightened his slightly bent back and reached for the door.

“I’m coming in.”

He spoke instead of knocking and entered the room.

The room was as cold as the corridor.

It was a simple room.

It was a ten square meter space made of concrete.

A secretary’s desk with a PC was located next to the door, but it was currently empty.

A world map and a map of Japan hung on the left and right walls and the only other furnishings were a small decorative plant on a chair and a coffeemaker.

Finally, there was a large desk in the back.

The wooden desk was long from left to right, piles of documents covered the left and right sides, and a familiar face sat on the other side.

That face was wearing reading glasses for the documents.

“Colonel ‘Odor’, commander of American UCAT’s Japanese Deployment and Assistant Inspector to Team Leviathan.”

Harakawa's breath was white as he spoke the man's name and titles. He then removed his hands from his leather jacket.

"I came here with a request. A single request."

He continued without waiting for a response.

"I want you to disclose the records on my father, Alberto Northwind."

Odor reacted to the boy's resounding voice.

He nodded toward the documents he had been looking at and raised his right hand.

"…"

A moment later, a metallic sound struck Harakawa.

The boy's body was slammed to the chilly floor.

●

Odor did not bother checking on that sound he was so used to hearing.

The documents before him were far more important.

He had no aide at the moment, so he had to handle all the paperwork on his own. And if he did not complete this stack of papers, he would have no free time and he would be unable to head out in an emergency.

This was a difficult time for American UCAT. The other UCATs were holding them in check, but they also had to defend the people Japanese UCAT could not.

He did not understand Top-Gear's movements.

Earlier, some of their guards had been drawn in by a Top-Gear survivor and then the entire unit had been wiped out.

The target that unit had been charged with protecting had subsequently been attacked by Top-Gear.

And of all things, 3rd-Gear's Concept Core had been stolen.

*This is… This is American UCAT's failure,* thought Odor.

Japanese UCAT had not actually asked them for this protection, but it was still a failure from the United States' point of view.

They had responded by sending out additional guards and putting Heo under complete surveillance. If she so much as tripped, a sniper team would fire a handkerchief onto the spot where she would land.

And to ensure all of that was perfect, he had a lot more paperwork to check over.

In truth, he felt they could always call Heo here, but that would stifle her sense of independence.

Odor wanted to let Heo continue her normal life as much as possible.

*…This paperwork… This paperwork will ensure that!*

Any other work was unnecessary and he did not have time to deal with the request of the boy who had selfishly left Heo.

And so he snapped the fingers of his right hand.

He did so thrice.

He did not want to make Heo sad, so he avoided smashing the boy to pieces. However, the boy did annoy him in a number of ways, so he struck the right leg, then the left arm, and – once his odor had drawn a diagonal line between those two points – the right arm.

This would smash the boy's bones and crush his flesh. The pain would go well beyond intense, so he would be lying unconscious and unmoving on the floor.

Odor would only need to call the general affairs department to have them clean up the room and transport the boy to the hospital. Most everything would be settled after the boy spent a day healing and it would give him a physical reason to rethink his actions.

Odor flipped through the documents and pushed his glasses up his nose, but he suddenly looked to the floor.

His gaze moved up from the floor.

There was a single reason for his gaze to move like that.

Even though his arms and right leg had been smashed, the boy was standing up.

"…"

His face was covered in sweat, blood dripped from his arms, and only his left leg had any real strength in it, but he managed to stand on that trembling leg and face Odor.

He let out a large white breath and then sucked in the chilly air.

"I won't say it again!" he said. "Will you grant me my request!?"

●

Harakawa shouted and stepped forward.

*…Dammit.*

He belatedly realized how absurd an organization UCAT was.

It was no place for him.

After all, he was a normal person. His race, fashion, lifestyle, tastes, and everything else were different from others', but no more different than anyone else's.

However, there were people who were much more different.

UCAT was made up of those people. Whether they wanted it or not, they had gained that difference and they tried to make some use of it. That was how Harakawa saw it anyway.

*…And those people don't need me.*

He was fine with being just as different as your normal person.

He only needed the standard sort of difference he could compare with those of the people he passed by, met, or got together with in town, on the streets, at the train station, at school, or anywhere else.

He did not need the kind of unique difference that one could show off.

That would not put him on the same level as others.

But…

*…I have something like that now.*

He was Thunder Fellow's pilot.

He could probably remove himself from that position. He could convince Heo, speak with Thunder Fellow, and have that setting removed.

An ace in American UCAT's air unit would be able to pilot the mechanical dragon better than him.

But he also knew about an organization where people with those unnecessary differences would gather and he knew about a girl who was trying to stay there.

*…Once…*

He remembered seeing himself in that girl.

Did he still?

Was he that kind of person?

Was he the type to gather on the windy emergency staircase when everyone else was having fun in the classroom?

The girl with him, the girl who could summon a dragon, had a certain past.

She had once trusted in her parents and used that trust to yearn for the sky.

But while he could trust his mother, he did not trust his father.

On that Christmas Eve ten years ago, the family had prepared to celebrate, but his father had taken his mother, told him to wait for them, and then left.

His father had been a sniper with greater than average skill.

Afterwards, only his mother had returned and she had been ill. From then on, he had been alone.

*And because I was alone,* he told himself.

*…I'm fine with being average.*

The battle with 5th-Gear was over and there was no reason for Heo to fight.

He wanted to become average. He did not desire this difference when it was not necessary.

*But,* he thought. *What if she doesn't just have that difference? What if she's the kind who can use that difference and embrace it?*

He had told her to become average. He had said everything he could, he had given his reasoning, and he had pushed her away.

But if she found a reason despite not having one or if she produced a reason out of thin air, it meant she was the real deal.

*…And I know she'll find one.*

It scared him that he believed that for no real reason.

But in that case, what would he do?

Would he cling to her difference so it carried him with her, would he leave, or…

"Please do this for me."

He hated his father. The man had been selfish, he had pushed Harakawa away, and he had died without giving any thought to anyone else.

But when Harakawa looked at what he was doing now…

*…Am I the same?*

He wanted to say no, but he thought that desire was hypocritical.

*…I can't believe I'm thinking of pushing someone away as the right thing to do.*

He hoped that would remove her desire to fight and make her average.

But from her point of view, he was rejecting her and abandoning her.

*Oh,* he thought.

*…Maybe my dad saw it this way too.*

"Now."

He moved forward while practically dragging himself with his left leg.

He saw Odor looking through some documents.

He knew the man was ignoring him and he knew why the man was doing so.

"Because I'm not meant for UCAT."

He had only been dragged along by her power and he had no ability beyond your average person.

*But,* he thought to convince himself.

"I'm here to find the answer."

Those words produced a reaction. As he flipped through the documents, Odor opened his mouth just a bit.

"What? What answer are you here to find?"

"Well," he began with a sigh.

He was one meter from the desk. He was within arm's reach, but neither of his arms would move.

So he dragged himself onward, finally made it another ten centimeters forward, and let out a white breath.

"I'm here to find which kind of person I am."

"And? And what options do you think there are?"

"Am I the kind of person I hate?" answered Harakawa. "Or am I the kind of person I like?"

"Then… Then which kind do you want to be once you learn of the past?"

Harakawa nodded at Odor's question.

He breathed in, filled his trembling body with strength, and answered.

"The kind of person who can survive and go back to where I should be."

A moment later, Odor raised his right arm and released the documents into the air.

He snapped his fingers and the papers scattered.

"Ridiculous! Absolutely ridiculous!"

His power struck Harakawa's entire body and his words filled the room.

"But! But I will let you off with only this strike, descendent of the north wind!!"

# Chapter 13

## “Morning Voices”

You want to check
You desire to check
You want to check each other
Always, always

●

A mountain sat below a dark winter morning.

The sun had yet to rise, so the green covering the mountain looked dark and deep.

A track ran through those evergreen shadows and a train moved along it.

It was a night train from Tokyo.

A few people were visible inside the white and red train as it travelled westward across the mountain.

The bunks were stacked two high and walls divided them into rooms of four.

The opening to the corridor had no door and each individual bunk had a curtain for privacy.

The clocks on the wall next to the bunks indicated it was early morning.

Two people sat next to each other on an empty bunk.

One was Sayama who wore a suit and had Baku on his head and the other was Shinjou who wore a shirt.

The boxes to the lunches they had bought at the station sat empty on their laps and they held documents in their hands.

“We got up pretty early, but we still have more than an hour in the mountains before reaching Izumo. We’ll still have time to spare even if we check through this.”

“We can read a lot more than before, but I doubt it will take up much of our time.”

“Yeah,” agreed Shinjou with a look down at the papers in her hand.

The letter from Shinjou Yukio they had found in the Kinugasa Library sat on her backpack to her left.

Sayama was reading through his own papers to her right.

But he quickly turned toward her.

“Are you tired, Shinjou-kun? You were up late last night writing your novel on your laptop and getting lost in thought as you read these documents. We just ate, so feel free to go to sleep. …You will be perfectly safe.”

“If it wasn’t for that last part, I might have let my guard down and gone to sleep.”

“Shinjou-kun, do you think I would do something to you?”

“Which one do you think I am right now?”

“Wh-why do you jump to such outlandish conclusions, Shinjou-kun!? It is so wonderfully sudden!”

“How about you deny the conclusion instead of pointing out how outlandish it is!?”

After yelling, Shinjou looked to the corridor and saw a passenger in pajamas giving them a worried glance.

*Ah,* she thought as heat filled her cheeks. She hid her reddening face behind the papers, grabbed her things, moved past Sayama and to the window, and hid herself behind the curtain.

“Honestly, there are people passing by in here.”

“Yes, but why were you assuming I would do something to you?”

“You won’t do anything weird?”

“I will not.”

“…”

“What is that silence for?”

“Well…” she said with a tilt of her head.

Was she being too suspicious? Was she being too cautious? But to be blunt, she doubted she could fight it if he did do anything, although she was not sure why.

“If I did fall asleep while sitting here, what would you do?”

“I would will you to lean my way.”

“And if I leaned toward the window instead?”

“My will is too strong for that.”

“I have no idea how your brain works, but fine. What if I leaned on you? Would you just spend the time like that?”

“Yes.” He nodded and brushed a hand along his documents to straighten them. “There is nothing to worry about. From there, it is a matter of my mental fortitude.”

“Then there’s plenty to worry about! Is it the Sayama way for your answer and your explanation to not match up?”

“Calm down, Shinjou-kun. It would be wrong to *not* do anything with you leaning up against me.”

“You don’t hold back on the craziness, do you? But…”

She lowered the ends of her eyebrows and spoke quietly from behind her papers.

“Lately… Ever since both bodies started working, you haven’t

done anything."

She could feel the heat reaching her ears as she continued.

"I haven't been doing it on my own, you know?"

"I am honored. But…"

He crossed his arms.

"I might go beyond merely checking. I might go all the way. Are you sure you want to do that just any old time? For example, would you want to do it here?"

She slowly thought about that and shook her head.

"Indeed." He nodded. "We must choose a better time and place. For example, on an especially momentous day and in a place where your perfection can reach the entire world."

"You mean like sunrise on New Year's while making a no-rope bungee jump from the Tokyo Government Office? You can do that on your own."

"Ha ha ha. Do you really think a government office built by the people's taxes would be enough? Ha ha. I am only kidding, Shinjou-kun."

"I have no idea what you're talking about! And what are you imagining!?"

Still, Shinjou had a thought.

*…I see.*

It was not that he had given up on her or gotten tired of her.

She had been telling herself that was not it, but she felt relieved to hear it from him.

Sayama was waiting for a number of conditions to be met.

*…I see.*

To cool her mind, she flipped through her documents. She had looked through most of it the night before and she had compared ideas with Sayama as he lay on the top bunk.

*…We learned a lot.*

These documents were more than just the ones from the library. There were also the ones they had taken from the Second Reference Room, the ones Kashima had faxed them in Kurashiki over the summer, and more that Sibyl had faxed them the previous night.

They still could not read a lot of it, but they could read far more than before.

Some of that included UCAT's summarized activities during the blank period.

By reading them in chronological order, Shinjou had learned that the first interaction with Top-Gear had occurred in 1948.

With some help from information left by Kinugasa Tenkyou, Sayama's grandfather and some 10th-Gear residents had guided a gate there. At first, the 10th representative had acted as an intermediary, but later, Izumo and Sayama's grandfathers had negotiated directly.

Most of the National Defense Department and old UCAT had not been privy to these things.

But in the seventies when Izumo's grandfather had died, the information had been released to all of Japanese UCAT and they had secretly began putting together anti-Top-Gear strategies and tactics.

*…The battle against Top-Gear was set for 1999.*

Thanks to Hajji's explanation, they knew that was a non-aggression treaty put together by Sayama's grandfather.

And they found three familiar names on the list of people who joined Japanese UCAT in April of '82: Sayama Asagi, Toda Yume, and Shinjou Yukio.

After their training, Sayama Asagi had joined the development department, Toda Yume had joined the general affairs department, and Shinjou Yukio had joined the development department.

However…

*…She joined Izumo UCAT's development department?*

Why had she alone moved elsewhere?

The documents also revealed where they had undergone training.

"Osaka's Mt. Ikoma region."

According to Sayama, Babel was in that area.

They could only read the title of the Babel interior investigation report they had found in the Study, but it had been written during that training.

*…However, only Sayama-kun's father and my mom could get inside.*

What did that mean?

Only Professor Kinugasa had been able to get in before, so why had they been able to enter?

*…And…*

Shinjou asked herself a silent question. Her mother was said to have nearly completed a concept creation theory, but was that thanks to seeing Babel which could supposedly construct concepts?

But if that was the case…

*…Why is there an incomplete concept creation facility below Japanese UCAT?*

Who had tried to build it and why?

"There are so many questions and too few answers. I never imagined my mom worked at Izumo UCAT."

"But it is a useful piece of information. We were already on our way there for the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear, but we may find information on your mother as well. …That is two birds with one stone."

"I hope so. …So what did you find?"

He held up the document on the abandoned Georgius project.

She gave the papers a puzzled look and he showed her the text.

"It seems Georgius allows you to use your opponent's concept field as your own."

"You mean…?"

"The stronger the opponent, the greater its output. It is much like a mirror. And it apparently did not originally bear the name Georgius. …My father gave it that name after seeing the Kinugasa Document."

He read an outline of the events given in the report.

"April 1983: Research and development begins.

"March 1984: Prototype fails to activate due to faulty production.

"April 1986: The Kinugasa Library and Study reveal the existence of the Kinugasa Document.

"September 1986: Manager Sayama reads the Kinugasa Document at Kinugasa Tenkyou's residence and gives up on the project."

Once he finished speaking, the train shook as the slope up the mountain steepened.

After crossing this mountain and travelling for about an hour, they would reach the Izumo region. Miyako would be waiting for them there in the Izumo IAI headquarters.

*…A lot happened last night.*

The foreign UCATs were waiting in Japan to see what Team Leviathan would do.

Shinjou was thankful because that had helped the situation settle down.

And Miyako was certain to request that they retrieve 3rd-Gear's Concept Core.

*…Doing that is our job and it will earn us their gratitude.*

She nodded but turned her focus back to the papers in Sayama's hand.

They could tell one thing from how much they could read.

"Your father tried to create Georgius but gave up and my mom very nearly completed a concept creation theory at Izumo UCAT."

"But your mother went to Top-Gear and my father remained in Low-Gear."

She could hear the slight pain behind his words, but a certain question occurred to her.

*…What kind of relationship did my mom and his father have?*

She wanted to ask if they had been friends, but she mentally shook her head.

Sayama was here and she was here because…

*…They both found someone important to them.*

Her mother had wished for her to be happy, so she wanted to believe that she was here because that was what her mother had wanted.

And most likely, Sayama felt the same.

The train shook a little and the shaking removed the tenseness from her shoulders.

*…What kind of person was my dad?*

Hajji had said he was Top-Gear's Shinjou. As the opposite of Shinjou Yukio, his name had also been Shinjou Yukio, albeit written with slightly different characters.

She was sure she would learn about him as well.

And after learning all that, they had to face Top-Gear.

Sayama seemed to have come up with some kind of "last resort" and he would probably tell her what that was during this trip.

*So it will all work out fine,* she told herself with a sigh while sorting through her documents.

Her mind was packed full of different thoughts and she had

already eaten, so she wanted to take things easy.

To lean up against Sayama, she lifted her hips a little to shift her butt over toward him.

"Nh?"

He seemed to have been thinking the same thing because he excitedly set his papers aside and scooted over as well. And he moved forcefully underneath her.

●

"Um…"

Behind the curtain, Shinjou ended up sitting on Sayama's lap. Also…

"Sayama-kun? Why are you pulling up my shirt?"

"Sayama Mikoto dislikes being asked for a reason."

"This is no time for a self-psychoanalysis! Just calm down! W-wait! Hey!"

"Think about it carefully, Shinjou-kun. To start with, we cannot go all the way here, right?"

"That is not where careful thought would lead you, but w-where are you going with this? To be clear, we can't do it here."

He nodded twice, but immediately put on a refreshing smile.

"Going all the way here would be a bad idea…but we can always stop partway."

"N-no, we can not! That would be a crime!"

She tried to support her protest by getting up, but that action ended up pulling down her underwear.

She gasped when the inside of her shirt directly touched her butt and she sat back down on his lap.

She frantically held her shirt down to hide the bare flesh between her legs and shook her head.

"L-let's calm down, okay? We're on a train right now, I'm panicking, and – look – it's morning outside."

"Why do you sound so flustered, Shinjou-kun? And an early winter morning still counts as night."

His hand moved from behind her shirt and touched her thighs, causing her to jump.

"Ah, wait. Even if we're only going partway, w-we can't do it here."

“Ha ha ha. This is a moving train, so we have already left ‘here’, Shinjou-kun.”

“Wah,” she cried as his hand slipped below her hands in inside her shirt.

She resisted by holding down the shirt, but the level of strength above and below the single layer of cloth was too great.

“Ah…”

His touch caused her to jump and she grabbed on the curtain she had pulled in front of her.

“…Ah.”

She turned toward him as if squeezing her body.

She let out a deep breath and looked him in the eye.

“Why?”

He nodded at her request for a reason.

“You were up all last night, weren’t you? We were talking the entire time, but in truth…you thought I might come down to join you, didn’t you?”

He was exactly right, so she felt her heart pound and searched for an excuse.

“U-um, well, uh…”

“I too am a coward. I was wondering if you might come up to join me.”

Shinjou reacted to that confession in two ways.

She blushed and averted her gaze downwards.

*…Ah.*

She had no excuse. Her heart was racing and she was covered in sweat.

“…”

She hesitantly looked up and found him giving her a relaxed version of his usual expressionless look.

“Do not worry, Shinjou-kun. I will only be checking on your body like usual. It has been a month and a half since the last time, though.”

“Really? I can leave it to you? But…someone might pass by.”

“Not to worry. The first time Setsu-kun’s body worked properly, we had opened the window for some partial exhibitio- gwah.”

A fist with the middle knuckle slightly extended was enough to do damage even without great arm strength.

Shinjou sighed as she watched Sayama hold his face below the nose.

*…I'm too kind. Kazami-san would have hit him another five times.*

She was worried about anyone noticing, but she still relaxed her body.

She let out a long breath, realized that coming up with an excuse would be impossible, and sat back down on Sayama's lap.

"Don't do anything weird, okay? Just do it like normal, okay?"

She looked around, but there were no footsteps in the corridor.

She also wondered how much longer until they reached Izumo.

"Now, um, Sayama-kun?"

She hung her head a little and felt heat filling her ears.

"Remember what I said. I want you to check on my body."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said again. "And not just now. I always want you to. … Without it, I've been feeling needlessly afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. I know it's a weird thing to say, but you know what?" she asked to make absolutely sure he was listening. "I was afraid you weren't interested in seeing me anymore now that I'm working properly."

"Shinjou-kun." He nodded once. "You are making so very many misunderstandings that I will have to summarize this quite a bit, but I am trying to be extremely sensitive to your needs as your mind and body begin working together and, until you can do everything properly, I will look, listen, touch, and do anything else that transcends what you will find on an educational program, so-…"

"Sayama-kun, Sayama-kun. You aren't summarizing it at all. It's all coming out in some kind of bizarre stream of consciousness."

"To put it simply, I am ready when you are."

"If you're ready…then so am I."

*What am I saying? I'm being way too kind,* she thought while unable to look him in the eye.

"Even if everything is working properly, I still want you to check on my body like always."

When she continued, she said what she truly thought.

"And you don't need a practical excuse for doing these things with

me anymore. I want you to see me as someone you simply want to do those things with, so, um…”

She searched for the right words and had trouble, but he said nothing to help her.

After a few breaths, she gathered her thoughts in a single question.

“Do you no longer want to check on my body now that it isn’t necessary?”

“That is not the case.”

He rejected her thoughts as usual and she looked up at those comfortable words.

She saw the serious expression on his face as he nodded and moved his hands to touch her.

“Ah.”

She shrank back, but he pulled her in from behind.

“Then this will be the day I resumed checking on your body. …We should make it a national holiday.”

*I’d rather we didn’t,* she thought with a bitter smile before he touched her again and another quiet gasp escaped her.

“But Sayama-kun? I…I… I can actually do it now.”

“Then we need to make up for the time we wasted last night. And the train will continue on after we finish, so you can sleep then. Once you wake, we will be in Izumo.”

“Right.”

She relaxed her body and rested her back on his chest. She then lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

“Can I ask one thing?”

“What is it? Do you need derby-style commentary? …Now, #1 Shinjou has left the gate! Shinjou has left the gate! #5 Arousal is gaining on her and #3 Shame cannot keep up!”

“Let it catch up and then calm down!”

After an exasperated sigh, she entrusted herself to him.

“Um?” she began. “If possible, when I go to sleep, could you lie next to him with your arms around my shoulders? If you do that, I think it really be morning when I wake up. The slightly scary night I’ve been living through will be over and the morning to reach our next destination will have arrived.”

She knew she was asking for a lot, but she still smiled and asked

him.

“It’s only a short time, but can you do that?”

●

A 4th plant creature woke in the morning sunlight.

Although in its case, “waking” only meant for the sensory organs on the end of its current body to begin functioning.

The plant creature did not actually sleep. When bathing in a warm light, the burden would activate its metabolism, but there was still a burden on its life functions even in the dark.

The amount of power being consumed was vastly different, but 4th-Gear’s creatures were always awake.

Here, the light had reached its sensory organs which had switched it from a passive to an active state.

It could not see the sky because it was in a room. The room was nearly dark, but…

“Window.”

A transparent area connected the room to the outside and the cloth covering it glowed a dark blue.

The plant creature knew that dark blue reached this world before the sun rose.

The creature did not move.

This was a very cold time for this world, which was a difficult state for a creature that consumed heat. This creature was a portion of the whole sent by Mukiti and it had been created based on data taken from bodies that had lived on the dark side of 4th-Gear’s ring-like land, but this world was still very cold at this time.

The night before, Heo had raised the room’s temperature before going to sleep.

“I’ll set the air conditioner to thirty-two degrees. I’ll turn on the electric carpet too.”

After saying that, she had also closed all of the room’s sliding screens and turned on a machine that let out steam.

“Humidifier?”

That had been borrowed from an individual named “Landlord” and it was still running.

That machine kept the room relatively warm. It was cold compared to the underground space the creature’s main body lived

in, but it was not so cold it would wither away.

Heo had also prepared some water the night before.

“Wash tub.”

The plant creature was sitting inside it. The large flower-colored container was filled with water.

The water was cold, but the creature understood Heo had prepared it out of kindness. For a creature that absorbed heat, it was nothing more than moisture and it slowed its metabolism, but…

“Natural water.”

Heo had filled it with something special and it tasted fairly good.

The creature had arrived as a negotiator, so it decided to focus on her kindness and not worry about small problems. It also decided to remember all of this for when it regrouped with the rest of itself.

The plant creature had then patiently waited for the sun to rise.

It was good at passing time. Its memories went back longer than it knew how to say, but they had been doing nothing since those earliest times.

The creature did not think of it in terms of “waiting”. It simply continued to watch as time passed.

Finally, the window grew white and sounds arrived from outside the room.

“Birds. Wind. …Engines?”

It took a few minutes to speak each word and it knew what those sounds meant.

The people of this world were beginning to move.

“Mukiti said people moving makes noise.”

The plant creature knew that to be the case. When Sayama moved, it made a lot of noise and sometimes Shinjou would stop it. Wings of light would grow from Kazami’s back and the ends of her limbs would often send someone flying, which caused a lot of noise. Izumo also made nice noises when he hit a wall.

They all made a variety of noises, but the creature still did not know them very well.

“I don’t know Low-Gear.”

It had a single question.

In a recent battle, Mukiti and the plant creature had heard about the creation of their world.

That in itself had no real meaning to them because they had

decided to go with Sayama.

However, there was a problem.

Low-Gear was said to have lied.

“Can we trust Low-Gear?”

4th-Gear did not have individuals, so it was difficult for them to understand the concept of individuals.

For 4th-Gear, a trustworthy existence did not have differing opinions between individuals.

It had a single unified opinion. That was a trustworthy existence just like them.

4th-Gear viewed Sayama and Shinjou’s thoughts as almost identical, even if they referred to themselves as opposites.

They were the representatives of Low-Gear, so 4th-Gear had extrapolated that the entire Gear was the same.

However, someone claimed Low-Gear had lied.

4th-Gear’s Mukiti and the plant creatures had wondered about that.

If Low-Gear had lied, it meant Sayama and Shinjou were liars too. In that case, was their “promise” for 4th-Gear to follow Sayama also a lie?

So they had decided to investigate to see whether Low-Gear had a single unified mind.

After gathering that thought, they had asked the individual named Ooshiro and he had spun around while giving them permission. The previous morning, an individual named Diana had placed this plant creature into a box.

It had entered a state known as “awaiting shipment”.

It had planned to go to either Mikage or Heo because it had met them before, but Mikage had apparently been injured.

Conveniently, something else was being sent to Heo, so it had been sent at the same time that night.

And now, it was in a space known as a room and waiting for the sun to rise.

It heard noises coming from outside the space. They were the noises of Low-Gear’s people.

If Low-Gear was not a liar, then Heo would also make noises as part of their uniform actions.

“Heo?”

It turned its sensory organs toward the girl and she moved.

In the center of the room, she slept on a fiber known as a “futon”.

It checked the thoughts that reached it and found her mind was asleep but her body was nearly active.

“Ah…”

She pushed off the futon’s blanket.

She had removed the fiber known as “clothing” that she had been wearing.

The surface of her body was flushed with heat. It was about an eighth warmer than the rest of the room.

The plant creature sensed some slight vapor coming from the surface of her body. It was known as sweat and Ooshiro often produced it when interacting with #8.

Heo bent her body on the futon while sweating.

“It’s hot…”

She twisted her body, crawled along the futon, and had it soak up her sweat.

She spread out her limbs to expose her body’s surface to the air and allow for excellent radiation of heat. The 4th-Gear plant creature began to wonder if Low-Gear’s creatures were really all that different from itself.

“Ooshiro doesn’t remove his clothes even when he sweats.”

It figured that was due to #8’s presence, but that did not seem enough of a reason to sacrifice such excellent heat radiation.

And Heo was doing what Ooshiro did not.

終わりのクロニクル

“Heo is clever.”

“Nn…”

Some soft sunlight was already entering the room. The light passed through the cloth covering the hole to the outside. It shined on Heo and caused her sweat to sparkle on her skin.

She groaned again and held the futon’s blanket in her arms.

She squeezed the blanket into a stem-like tube, pressed it against her stomach, wrapped her thighs around it, and gently bit into it.

“Harakawa…”

The Harakawa inside her sleeping mind was not here.

Listening to someone’s thoughts was easy, but the plant creature felt the rules were different when that person was asleep.

“I will ask.”

It left the wash tub and the splashing water dripped onto the newspaper laid out below.

“Tatami.”

Its wet legs and body walked over to the futon and found Heo’s flushed back.

Its sensory organs saw Heo panting and realized her heat radiation was insufficient.

“Tired? Tired?”

It tilted its head and felt like eating something, so it decided to solve both of their problems at once. It lifted up its fifteen centimeter body which was damp with cold water.

“Heo, wake up.”

It slowly placed its damp body on Heo’s bare back.

A wet sound came from the point of contact just as the plant creature expelled air.

“Hyah!” cried Heo as she jumped out of the futon.

# Chapter 14

## "A Place of Old Memories"

That is a path to the past
Nothing can return
All one can do is think

●

The underground portion of Japanese UCAT was filled with hectic activity.

It was mostly work to restore the facility and the people moving from floor to floor shook the entire building.

But one area near the center of the underground space remained still: the development department.

The large room was filled with people wearing lab coats who would leave when called over an internal line, but would return after about an hour.

A single voice spoke for all of them. It came from the woman sitting at a large desk by the back wall.

“It isn’t easy being considerate.”

The elderly woman’s nametag said Tsukuyomi Shizuru and she crossed her arms behind her head.

*…Just because the other Gears are taking action against UCAT or holing up doesn’t mean you have to as well.*

But none of them were doing a thing and had been like this the entire time. They were all giving it a lot of thought, going to work, and doing their jobs, but they were not actively making an appearance anywhere.

“I suppose none of us knows quite what to do. We can’t exactly become their enemy again at this point, but the other Gears keep going for it and it makes us think maybe we should too.”

Tsukuyomi spoke her thoughts to the entire relaxed development department.

She felt they had finally returned to their old attitude, but at the same time, something had begun to move today.

That movement came from beyond a partition near the center of the room, it was centered on two men, and it was noisy.

They were still whispering, but their voices were picking up speed.

“Like I was saying, Kashima, you just have to make a sword! One that can cut all sorts of stuff!”

“What are you talking about, Atsuta? I was only released from the hospital three days ago. Think about this. I was hospitalized for a month and a half with all those broken ribs.”

“What? You mean you’re still in rehabilitation?”

“Yes, I am. This is an important period of rehabilitation. I have to recover from the lack of Natsu-san nursing me in the hospital room. Although, she has been rewarding me with way more videos than usual ever since I got out of the hospital.”

“This isn’t about your damn videos!!”

Tsukuyomi saw short hair dyed blond rise above the partition as someone stood up.

“With you gone, I haven’t had a weapon, so I’ve been stuck sitting here silently!!”

Hearing that, every single person in lab coat or work outfit stood up from the partitions.

“That last part is a complete lie!!”

●

Sitting in his chair, Kashima nodded at the entire development department’s unified opinion.

He looked to Atsuta who was resting his elbows on the partition entrance.

“Besides, Atsuta. Ooh, look. Here’s a video of Harumi. What do you even need to cut?”

“For starters, I could cut out the center of what you just said.”

“What are you talking about? Oh, she’s so cute. If you’re going to cut out anything, it would be the start and end.”

He watched his laptop’s screen and it began to play a video of Natsu in a hospital room.

*…Hm, I can’t let anyone else see this one. This is the one that goes from her casual silence to a kiss. She closes her eyes and stops just before kissing the monitor.*

“Hey. Hey, Kashima. Earth to Kashima. Why are you kissing your monitor, you ape?”

“Ha ha ha. I feel sorry for you, Atsuta. You can’t understand or even see this sense of closeness.”

As he spoke, Kashima transferred more and more of the data he had filmed at home onto the laptop.

He set a few of the important files so they would only play with his fingerprint and then he faced forward.

“What’s that weird look for, Atsuta? You’re ruining your usual

weird looks."

"Are you looking for a fight?"

"I am. It's going to be quite a fight to convert all 672 GB of data before tomorrow."

"Wait, just a damn second. Have you never heard of trimming the fat?"

"Of course I have. …This is what was left after I carefully selected only the essentials!!"

"That's not how it works and don't look so proud! …Listen!"

Atsuta grabbed at the air and set it down.

"Put those videos down here! Here!"

Kashima did as he was told and set his laptop on the floor.

"Yes, the floor is cold and will keep it from overheating. …That was a great idea, Atsuta! Looks like you know what it takes to work with videos. I'm glad I can finally call you a video buddy."

Kashima showed off his teeth in a smile, looked up at Atsuta, and held out his hand for a handshake.

"Welcome aboard, my video buddy!"

"Y-y-y-y-you bastard! …Who are you calling your video buddy!? Well!?"

Atsuta knocked Kashima's hand aside, but Kashima gave a serious expression and slowly pointed at the center of Atsuta's forehead.

"Wasn't it obvious? I was talking about you. Why are the veins on your temple bulging out like that? Besides, I just sent Natsu-san an email saying you started making videos thanks to Harumi."

The cellphone at his waist vibrated, so he pulled it out.

"Here's her response: 'Then from now on, today will be Atsuta-san's video anniversary, won't it?' "

"See? You have my wife's approval. Isn't that great?"

He held out the phone, but Atsuta snatched it and bit into it. After three crunching chews, the phone had completely lost its shape and he suddenly bent backwards.

"Kwaaah! The electronics are shocking my teeth!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. It may be rich in minerals, but eating something that hard is bad for your jaw. And pay me back for that. 5,800 yen for the phone itself and 1,780,000,000 for the lost emails from my wife."

Hearing that, Atsuta bared his teeth and clicked his tongue.

“Do you have any intention of holding a serious conversation!?”

“Hold on. What about you? If you were listening to me, then tell me what I was saying.”

“Videos, videos, videos, Harumi, Natsu.”

“D-don’t you dare refer to Natsu-san without an honorific!!”

“And you don’t have anything to say about the rest of that!?”

The two of them grabbed at each other’s collars, heating up the room, but a voice suddenly reached them from beyond the partition.

“You two certainly are full of energy.”

They looked over and saw Tsukuyomi standing with her arms crossed.

“Heh.”

Atsuta turned his head her way and then turned back to Kashima.

“Hey, Kashima. I think some kind of monster’s come to scold us. What’s that one called? The Development Hag?”

“I’m pretty sure she only wants to scold you. I’ve been doing work even while I was out.”

“Is that so?” asked Tsukuyomi. “Then what were you developing?”

Kashima used his laptop to display a text project report with illustrations that he had made in the hospital.

“A passionate supplement for the father who wants to film his child’s growth both day and night! I call it the Royal Vita-Video!”

“Then make it yourself and take it yourself.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous! It would only work if Natsu-san made it for me!!”

“Then how are you going to mass produce it!?” shouted everyone else in the room.

“With that, how about we start talking seriously.”

Kashima pushed his glasses up his nose and sat down. For some reason, he heard sighs from his surroundings.

He looked up at Atsuta and Tsukuyomi who were glaring at him.

“Basically, things are a lot like they were before, aren’t they?”

“Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

“Then this is simple. The other Gears live in the reservations and let UCAT manage their Concept Cores.”

Kashima did not hesitate to speak as he crossed his legs in front of Atsuta who frowned.

“But 2nd-Gear is different. Yamata is sealed inside Totsuka which is under our control. And we are members of UCAT, so we can fully manage Yamata and we have no problem living in Low-Gear.”

He made sure everyone else in the room could hear him.

“We won’t gain anything from complaining and we lose our control of Yamata if we leave UCAT.”

“But Low-Gear bears the crime of destroying Top-Gear.”

“Unfortunately, the development department was primarily run by 2nd-Gear even during the blank period. Just as Director Tsukuyomi’s husband was in the department then, many other 2nd-Gear residents worked with UCAT.”

He let out a breath.

“We can’t escape it. If we look into the blank period, I’m sure we’ll find just how much our families were involved with UCAT at the time. So the only thing we can do now is…”

“Oh! Slice up as much stuff as we can!?”

“It must be nice to have such a one-track mind.”

Kashima smiled bitterly, crossed his arms, shook his chair, and turned to Tsukuyomi.

“We need to prepare ourselves. There is no denying the past, so to face that past and clear the way for the future, we can only fight in our own way. …I suggest we help Team Leviathan.”

He called Atsuta’s name.

The man frowned and turned toward him from the partition entrance.

“What got you so serious all of a sudden? Are you picking a fight with me?”

“Why are you even here? …But more importantly, you keep saying you want a weapon, right? In that case, I have a bit of interesting job for you.”

“A job?”

Atsuta frowned again and Kashima reached a hand to his desk.

He had a month and a half of mail piled up there, but the very top of the pile was a single fax paper and a white origami crane.

“I don’t know what this crane is, but this fax arrived from a convenience store at the base of the mountain this morning.”

He toyed with the crane in his right hand as he grabbed the fax paper with his left and held it up in front of Atsuta. It then passed

effortlessly between them as if slipping through the air.

"That fax is a request for some help, but I'm still not fully recovered. But if you're willing to go help for me…"

Atsuta snatched the paper from the air as if trying to cut it.

At the same time, Kashima opened the wings of the origami crane with both hands.

"I'm willing to lend you the prototype to a new Cowling Sword I was working on."

●

The underground corridor was white.

It was about four meters wide and two meters tall.

The walls were white, the ceiling was white, and the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were fully lit.

Four pairs of footsteps walked below that light and the lead set came from a woman in a lab coat.

"I'd love to conserve energy since we're keeping everyone out, but Moira 1st and the others insisted."

The lab coat's nametag said Tsukuyomi Miyako and it reflected the light.

A blonde woman in a maid uniform walked next to Miyako and she turned toward the two walking behind them.

"Sorry, Master Sayama, Lady Shinjou. We would love to conserve energy because it costs a lot to keep the lights on inside the concept space, but it is necessary for security reasons."

Sayama, who wore a suit, gave the maid a small nod.

"Not to worry, Moira 1st-kun. We will pay the power bill."

"Hold on," cut in Miyako. "Don't go easy on us. I'll take out an extended loan to pay."

"View it as a sign of our friendship with 3rd," insisted Sayama. "After all, if you were to trip in the dark, it could erase the proof of the connection between Low-Gear and 3rd."

Moira 1st nodded.

"He is exactly right, Lady Miyako. Think of it as a way to celebrate."

"Sure, sure."

Miyako crossed her arms behind her head as she walked and Shinjou elbowed Sayama in the side.

“Sayama-kun, I really don’t think you should be so direct about that.”

“My apologies.”

Shinjou heard Moira 1st and Miyako laugh bitterly at that.

*Am I worrying too much?* she wondered while bringing a hand to her own stomach.

*…People can be so different. I wonder what I’ll be like when it happens to me.*

With that thought, she relaxed her shoulders and noticed writing on the wall.

“BF2? So this is the second basement?”

“You went to the first basement last time, right? That’s where the reference room is.”

Before, she had been looking for her family. This time, they were here for the Leviathan Road and to search for her mother’s past in hopes of learning about Top-Gear’s destruction.

*…It feels like we’re heading further into the dungeon after levelling up.*

Suddenly, Moira 1st pulled a flag from below her apron. It said “Team Leviathan Tour Guide” on it.

“Now, to your right, you will see Izumo UCAT’s famous relaxing sand dune room.”

Shinjou looked over and saw a large sand pit with holes for sand bathing.

Sand and stones were left in the corridor like strange works of art, providing common decorations for the second basement’s corridors.

The automatons waiting in the sand pit pointed toward a hole and crouched down as if urging her to climb in, but she pretended not to see it.

“Isn’t Tottori the place known for its sand dunes?”

“Shinjou-kun, Shinjou-kun. This is much like how Tokyo conquered a portion of Urayasu, Chiba.”

“I see.”

She nodded and turned to Moira 1st who had stopped with a smile frozen on her face.

After a long silence, the automaton cleared her throat.

“Now, to your left, you will see Izumo UCAT’s miniature aquarium

which is fun for the whole family."

Shinjou looked over and saw a large fish tank with an underwater corridor.

She recognized some of the fish swimming in it and she gasped in awe at seeing them so up close.

"Look, Sayama-kun! Sea bream! There are sea bream in there! I'd heard their colors look really faded, but it's true!"

As soon as she pointed at a large one, a net suddenly scooped it up.

"You like the looks of that one, do you?" asked a smiling Moira 1st. "We can serve it to you for lunch, so how about it?"

"Sayama-kun! Sayama-kun! I think I was just traumatized in another new way!"

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, eating them is the same as holding a memorial service. Has this been an educational experience?"

They continued walking and suddenly noticed someone standing at the other end of the corridor.

It was a well-built elderly man. He wore a white suit, his arms were both held upwards, and a smile covered his face.

However, Moira 1st and Miyako ignored him and passed him by just like all the sand and stone decorations.

Shinjou picked up on that and walked past the man along with Sayama.

After about three steps, she heard him turn around and snap his fingers.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. Are you sure you should be doing that or whatever? Well!?"

His voice caused Miyako to pick up her pace and lean forward a little.

"Sayama, Shinjou, don't worry about him. Don't answer him either. He'll possess you if you do."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. Miyako-kun! Isn't that a mean thing to say? C'mon! C'mon!"

The man walked up to their left, continued to say "c'mon", struck a pose for some reason, and removed his coat.

"Can you say my name!?"

A straight kick from Miyako slammed into his torso and he crashed into the fish tank to the left.

After a deep sound of impact, the glass cracked and Miyako turned around faster than the fish could flee.

“Okay, that bought us some time. Let’s get going.”

“A-are you sure? I’m pretty sure that’s Izumo’s-…”

“Don’t say it. He’ll possess you. Just a bit further.”

“Just a bit further?” asked Shinjou before hearing a voice from behind them.

“Wait, wait, wait. Miyako-kun! How can you do this when my old friends’ living products aka children are here?”

Miyako pulled a remote from her pocket and hit the switch.

The floor behind them audibly opened and the man in a white suit gave a gentle scream as he vanished into the abyss.

Shinjou turned around in surprise, but she could only hear a loud crash as the man landed.

“Why was there a trapdoor there?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but it seems this place is designed a lot like Japanese UCAT’s underground area.”

“Oh, I get it now.”

Shinjou gained a baseless sense of understanding and Miyako pointed at their destination.

It was a large door leading to the third basement.

“The secret area is up ahead, but it seems that old guy from before is opening it up for you. He’s also letting us from 3rd live in some empty space. And…”

Miyako slowed her pace and gently walked forward. She looked back over her shoulder while approaching the door.

“What do you think is back here?”

“I would assume Concept Core storage facilities, starting with 8th-Gear’s,” answered Sayama. “After all, Gram and the Cores for 6th and 10th were originally stored here.”

“Then why do you think those storage facilities were created here?”

Miyako arrived at the door as she asked.

That door led downstairs. She tapped on it with the back of her hand and gave Shinjou and Sayama a sharp look.

Her next words were more than enough to make Shinjou tremble.

“Shinjou Yukio.”

When she saw Shinjou gasp and look up, Miyako nodded.

“I said this place is a lot like Japanese UCAT, remember? Put that together with what I just told you. …Now, what do you think is back here?”

Shinjou worked to bring her breathing under control.

She removed the backpack containing her binder, documents, and laptop and she held it in front of herself.

She thought about what that question meant, nodded once, and made up her mind.

“Is there a concept creation facility in there?”

Miyako’s expression did not change, but that was the only possible answer based on what she had said.

“There is, isn’t there? My mom moved to Izumo UCAT, but that was because this is where her mother and my grandmother lived and she must have tried to build a concept creation facility based on what she saw inside Babel.”

When Miyako nodded, something seemed to move in approval.

But oddly enough, Shinjou could not see anything around her that could have moved.

“?”

Still, she sensed what she could only describe as the lingering scent of movement.

And so she looked both ways and asked about it.

“What is this? Some kind of weird presence reacted to what you said, Miyako-san.”

Yet there was no one around.

However, she did hear a voice. Miyako bent over with laughter by the door.

“Ha ha. They’re delighted that you got the answer right.”

“Th-they’re delighted? What are?”

“Well.” Miyako straightened up and shrugged with a bitter smile. “There’s no way I would know all that on my own. I had a little guidance.”

“You mean…it wasn’t that weird guy in white?”

Miyako shook her head and cleared her throat.

“Listen. Someone like that isn’t going to know the answer. It was-…”

Suddenly, Sayama moved to Shinjou’s right.

She took a confused step back just as he picked something up

from the floor.

It was…

“A stone!?”

At some point, several of the stones decorating the corridor had arrived at her feet.

And they had moved there on their own.

Sayama frowned, held up the one he had picked up in both hands, and carefully observed it.

“Did you come out to greet us?”

A sound on the floor answered him. A stone rolled along the white plastic to line up and sand crawled along with it and spread out.

“It’s forming letters.”

“Hi.”

The stone and sand created a quick greeting and then spelled out its name.

“Messenger” “of” “Vanambi.”

“Eh?”

“Sorry.” “Messed up.” “Don’t worry about it.”

The writing was spelled out with greater and greater speed, but the previous letters were erased and replaced.

“Messenger” “of” “Wanambi.”

The sand and stone spelled out its name in only three seconds, and it created new words between the two visitors and Miyako who smiled bitterly.

“Well done” “coming here.”

A moment later, two things happened.

First, Miyako opened the door behind her and revealed the facility inside it.

And second…

*…Baku.*

From Sayama’s head, Baku raised his front legs while looking at the Messenger of Wanambi.

It almost looked like he desired the past they held.

And then Shinjou saw that past.

●

Sayama saw a dark, large, and yet cramped space.

*…Is this the concept creation facility we saw beyond that door?*

The dimly-lit area was covered in equipment from the floor to the ceiling. The floor contained white consoles, controls, and machinery measuring around a dozen meters each that were packaged in white and were clearly meant to process or manage something. There was also piping connecting it all together and…

*…What is this that I thought were the walls?*

Tanks and containers measuring several meters tall were visible through the darkness.

It was all packed in tightly, creating a jungle of machinery with gangways allowing passage.

But below the cables that hung like ivy, space was cleared down the center for a main pathway.

A single console was located at the center of that pathway and at the very center of the space.

It was about four meters long and resembled the console to a built-in kitchen.

Some more controls had been added later, along with a bookshelf and…

"A cupboard? You sure like to be comfortable, Shinjou Yukio."

Sayama recognized the voice that filled the room. It came from the individual sitting in the chair in front of the console.

*…Doctor Chao.*

She rested her elbow on the console, rested her head on her hand, and stared past the console with her eyes only half open.

"I went out of my way to bring the four brothers here so you could gather some data on the Concept Core, so make sure you put it to use."

Sayama heard someone respond. It was a female voice located beyond the console.

"Thank you very much, Doctor Chao. If I can investigate 7th too, I'll be only a step away."

The voice resembled one he knew quite well.

*…Shinjou-kun?*

With that question, he saw who Chao was looking at. It was a woman in a lab coat with steam rising from the cup in her hand.

"Do you want some coffee?"

Her long black hair swayed below the faint lighting.

He could see a hint of Shinjou in the slight bend to her eyes and

the smile on her lips.

This was Shinjou Yukio.

Baku had previously shown her to them for just a moment in the back of the Kinugasa Library.

Shinjou had said nothing, but it was clear to Sayama that she was her mother.

*…I wonder how Shinjou-kun feels about seeing this.*

終わりのクロニクル

*I need to support her once this is over,* he decided. He contemplated whether to place his arm around her shoulder or her waist, but he was interrupted by Chao's voice after she took the coffee cup.

"Don't you have any cigarettes?"

"This is an important research facility, you know?"

"Asagi smokes like crazy, though."

Yukio smiled and weakly tilted her head.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Yume-san will get after him for it."

"Yume's in the Kinugasa Library to gather all of the documents you or Asagi ask for. Lately, Itaru's been working as her assistant when he has the free time."

"That must be nice."

Yukio smiled bitterly and rested her upper body on the console. She also tapped on her cup with both hands.

"Ahh… I wish I could live surrounded by books too. Something like Diana's room."

"You don't understand the meaning of work, do you?"

Despite her words, Chao was smiling bitterly.

As she smiled, a slight sound came from down on the floor.

Sayama looked down and saw a fist-sized stone and sand at Yukio's feet. Chao's smile vanished.

"Is that…?"

"That is the Messenger of Wanambi, 8th-Gear's Concept Core. … It came out when I opened the container."

"I hear it chose for itself to leave the reservation. …Does it like you?"

"Yes, it seems they're silicon lifeforms, or something like it. My grandfather taught them the language, so they can speak. …Oh, but you were there, so I guess you already knew that."

"Yeah," muttered Chao and the Messenger of Wanambi spoke to her.

"Remember," "but" "still" "young" "Strange" "Some kind of trickery!"

"Are you picking a fight with me?"

The stone rolled behind Yukio to hide.

Yukio smiled and pulled a book from the console's bookshelf.

It was a university physics textbook.

“Here’s your dinner. Your dinner of knowledge.”

“Understood” “Yukio” “Good” “person” “Good person”

The stone and sand carried the textbook on top of itself and vanished into the darkness.

Yukio waved goodbye.

“It’s amazing. Every single grain of what looks like sand is a lifeform with the ability to think. And by sharing their mind, they gain tremendous calculation power. They’re a lifeform that takes the shared memories of 3rd’s automatons and further focuses it on calculations.”

“While 4th’s plant creatures are a single lifeform, these ones are truly split into individuals yet share their mind to create a single lifeform, hm? It’s a lot like the relationship between a whole human body and each individual cell, isn’t it? According to Sayama, 8th-Gear had a single planet, but the planet itself was a single lifeform.”

“Yes,” replied Yukio. “They have a collective mind and the ability to duplicate and manage information is held by Wanambi, the Concept Core. To 8th-Gear, Wanambi is probably a lot like a human’s DNA.”

Yukio took a breath, looked into the darkness it had vanished into, and placed her hands on her knees.

“I wonder how Old Sayama brought them back from that empty world they floated in. …Well, I doubt it was anything good.”

She shrugged.

“Apparently, the people of other Gears used to borrow 8th-Gear’s calculation power. 3rd and 5th had their help in designing the mechanical dragons and gods of war. That’s all they could do because they can’t fight and they’re very nice. Also…they remember doing that. Do you know what that means?”

“Those stones remember every Gear they went to, right?”

“Yes.” Yukio crossed her legs and faced Chao again. “They could grow accustomed to any Gear and were useful there. Once they realized that, the clever things decided to not take an active role in the Concept War. Their Concept Core, Wanambi, is their collective mind itself and it decided it could survive even if it meant moving to a new world.”

“So they’re a nomadic race, are they? …That’s a lot different from those that clung to their own world to the bitter end.”

“They had a lot of freedom in that way, so it’s still a mystery how Old Sayama managed to guide them here.”

Sayama then heard Yukio say they were helping her.

The feeling that gave him was not bad and a sudden thought came to him.

*…This is so easygoing.*

He had expected the blank period to have a darker atmosphere what with the impending fight against Top-Gear.

Regardless, this was still a place meant to prepare for that fight.

*I suppose everyone is different,* he concluded and looked forward again.

Chao brought her cup to her mouth, sipped, and took a breath before speaking.

“You know, that idiot Kaoru managed to contact the other side with a group from 10th.”

Yukio collapsed onto the console again.

“Ahh,” she began. After a pause, she continued. “Top-Gear is asking for either me or Asagi-kun to visit, aren’t they?”

“They technically only asked for your generation as a group, but it’s obvious what they want. They’re afraid of you since you entered Babel and built this facility.”

“Getting into Babel was a complete coincidence for both Asagi-kun and me. We still don’t know how why we can get in. …So I’m not sure what to say when that’s why they’re interested.”

Her words brought Sayama’s mind to the surface.

*…They don’t know why they can get in?*

That was written in the report, but the inclusion of “still” suggested they had done so more than once.

She had likely done so to complete her concept creation theory and build this facility.

And she said more while still lying on the console and stroking her cup.

“It was supposedly created in Top-Gear, so if only they still had some information on it.”

“They must be desperately searching through their history. But…”

“Babel is a really old artifact. …You know the result of the tests on its exterior, don’t you?”

"You said it has no concept of time, right?"

"Yes," confirmed Yukio while slowly sitting up. "The inside is still functioning without any corrosion. It was clearly built by humans… or at least intelligent lifeforms the same size as us. And to gain the most space inside, the walls are used as the floor via gravitational control."

"That's what you said. And there's enough space for an entire city inside, right?"

"We saw what must have been a park and residential area. Most of it was made from natural materials though, so it had rotted away."

She smiled bitterly and lightly tapped the console.

"But everything made from inorganic materials was still up and running and there was something much like this. Its design was more refined and efficient, though. …If only we could take that equipment outside, I'm sure it could create concepts right away."

"What, do you want to take the negative concepts out of Babel? Or are you going to lug all that equipment out on your own?"

"Couldn't I get Asagi-kun's help?"

Yukio shook her chair, placed her hands on the console, and gave a small smile.

"This must be tough for Top-Gear. Something they made is being studied by us…and it's sure to be the key to our confrontation."

"It's best not to think about it too much. In the off chance the positive concepts are annihilated by the negative concepts, your concept creation is needed to create new power."

"I wonder if I'm trying to play god by doing this?"

"Don't say that when you pretty much already are, idiot."

"You're right." Yukio smiled. "But I'm really interested in the idea of god. …For example, who created the concepts in the first place?"

She turned toward Chao as she spoke.

"Do you know why Top-Gear is so afraid of Low-Gear?"

"Isn't it because of Babel and you? If we can create concepts, they lose the advantage the positive concepts give them."

"But we have the positive concepts, too. Not all of the Gears have sided with UCAT yet, but we can always negotiate with them to borrow their Concept Cores."

"You make it sound easy."

"Yes." Yukio looked up at the ceiling and shrugged. "Guessing at the construction of the concepts for the Gears we don't have the Cores to is really hard. I have to look through all of the records on past battles with them. It would be a lot easier if we could just negotiate for the Cores."

"That's the opinion of someone working on this here. More importantly, are you going to answer your question for me?"

"Oh."

Yukio lowered her shrugged shoulders.

Sayama's mind recognized the motion as one Shinjou made.

*…Why Top-Gear is afraid of Low-Gear?*

Yukio held out her right hand and raised three fingers.

"Your answer of Babel is part of it, but there are a total of three reasons they fear us. The first is Babel and the second is a fact they stumbled upon when searching for any records of Babel in their world."

Her eyebrows bent a little.

"Their world lacks the Biblical mythology."

"What?"

Sayama's mental heart leaped when he heard Chao's question.

*…Top-Gear lacks the Biblical mythology?*

*Why is that?* he wondered.

*…And what does it mean!?*

As if to answer his questions, Yukio leaned forward a little and smiled.

"Old Sayama and the 10th people who have visited have yet to notice because they're focused on the negotiations and not doing any sightseeing. But think about it. If Low-Gear's various mythologies come from contact with the other Gears, the Biblical mythology would not just be the historical truth of Top-Gear; they would be what made Top-Gear itself. In other words…"

"Top-Gear should be the world of the Bible, but it's just a normal world much like this one."

Having said that much, Chao gasped and Yukio gave a troubled smile.

"If it was the world of Biblical mythology, they could just check their history to learn about Babel. If those myths were existing things there and not just something from the past, there would be

existing objects to act as records and they would still be using similar things. …Assuming their culture or civilization was never lost, that technology would still exist there," said Shinjou. "But Top-Gear wants Asagi-kun and me. …Yet to Top-Gear, Babel should just be a relic of the past. Why do they want to hear from people who went inside it? If Top-Gear had Babel's knowledge as part of their living mythology, they would be able to create an even greater Babel…and they would have attacked us as soon as we entered Babel."

"But that didn't happen, so…"

"Yes." Shinjou got up and held her cup in front of her waist with a smile. "I think Top-Gear lacks the Biblical mythology. For some reason, they seem to lack something we have. That is why they cannot find any ancient records for this. They have lost the clue they need to create Babel, despite having supposedly created it in the first place. And that is why they fear us. They fear that the Biblical mythology they lack will become the strength that defeats them. … After all, it is one of the things Low-Gear has that they do not."

She moved her right hand by lowering the last of the three raised fingers.

"And there is one other thing Low-Gear has that Top-Gear does not."

"Is it another mythology?"

"No." Yukio shook her head and smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered. "I still do not know what it is. …Most likely, no one knows. But I do know that it is something that Low-Gear and only Low-Gear possesses."

"Hm? …There's something like that in this negative Gear?"

"There is." Yukio's smiled changed. Her eyes bent and the ends of her eyebrows returned to normal. "I want to know what it is and that is what I'm working on. I believe it is directly linked to the meaning behind Low-Gear's existence."

Sayama heard confidence filling her voice.

"I believe it is a value given by god that allows this world to exist despite being negative."

*…Value? Low-Gear has something like that?*

As Sayama asked that, his mind's vision grew dark.

He was returning to the present. He was waking from this brief

and important dream.

And as he fell into that dozing darkness, he thought.

*…Top-Gear lacks the Biblical mythology.*

But Yukio had said Low-Gear possessed something the other Gears did not.

He had another thought as well. Yukio had realized so very much, so…

*…Why did she go to Top-Gear?*

He suddenly sensed something in that thought.

Shinjou Yukio had to have had a reason for going to Top-Gear.

He felt that her actions and deeds were a common thread connecting everything they had discovered about the past.

"Then were we right in thinking that pursuing Shinjou Yukio is the key to reaching Top-Gear's destruction?"

Would they be able to find a truth that allowed them to oppose Top-Gear?

"Let us follow her path and her deeds."

With those words, Sayama's mind awoke.

終わりのクロニクル

*I need to support her once this is over,* he decided. He contemplated whether to place his arm around her shoulder or her waist, but he was interrupted by Chao's voice after she took the coffee cup.

"Don't you have any cigarettes?"

"This is an important research facility, you know?"

"Asagi smokes like crazy, though."

Yukio smiled and weakly tilted her head.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Yume-san will get after him for it."

"Yume's in the Kinugasa Library to gather all of the documents you or Asagi ask for. Lately, Itaru's been working as her assistant when he has the free time."

"That must be nice."

Yukio smiled bitterly and rested her upper body on the console. She also tapped on her cup with both hands.

"Ahh… I wish I could live surrounded by books too. Something like Diana's room."

"You don't understand the meaning of work, do you?"

Despite her words, Chao was smiling bitterly.

As she smiled, a slight sound came from down on the floor.

Sayama looked down and saw a fist-sized stone and sand at Yukio's feet. Chao's smile vanished.

"Is that…?"

"That is the Messenger of Wanambi, 8th-Gear's Concept Core. … It came out when I opened the container."

"I hear it chose for itself to leave the reservation. …Does it like you?"

"Yes, it seems they're silicon lifeforms, or something like it. My grandfather taught them the language, so they can speak. …Oh, but you were there, so I guess you already knew that."

"Yeah," muttered Chao and the Messenger of Wanambi spoke to her.

"Remember," "but" "still" "young" "Strange" "Some kind of trickery!"

"Are you picking a fight with me?"

The stone rolled behind Yukio to hide.

Yukio smiled and pulled a book from the console's bookshelf.

It was a university physics textbook.

“Here’s your dinner. Your dinner of knowledge.”

“Understood” “Yukio” “Good” “person” “Good person”

The stone and sand carried the textbook on top of itself and vanished into the darkness.

Yukio waved goodbye.

“It’s amazing. Every single grain of what looks like sand is a lifeform with the ability to think. And by sharing their mind, they gain tremendous calculation power. They’re a lifeform that takes the shared memories of 3rd’s automatons and further focuses it on calculations.”

“While 4th’s plant creatures are a single lifeform, these ones are truly split into individuals yet share their mind to create a single lifeform, hm? It’s a lot like the relationship between a whole human body and each individual cell, isn’t it? According to Sayama, 8th-Gear had a single planet, but the planet itself was a single lifeform.”

“Yes,” replied Yukio. “They have a collective mind and the ability to duplicate and manage information is held by Wanambi, the Concept Core. To 8th-Gear, Wanambi is probably a lot like a human’s DNA.”

Yukio took a breath, looked into the darkness it had vanished into, and placed her hands on her knees.

“I wonder how Old Sayama brought them back from that empty world they floated in. …Well, I doubt it was anything good.”

She shrugged.

“Apparently, the people of other Gears used to borrow 8th-Gear’s calculation power. 3rd and 5th had their help in designing the mechanical dragons and gods of war. That’s all they could do because they can’t fight and they’re very nice. Also…they remember doing that. Do you know what that means?”

“Those stones remember every Gear they went to, right?”

“Yes.” Yukio crossed her legs and faced Chao again. “They could grow accustomed to any Gear and were useful there. Once they realized that, the clever things decided to not take an active role in the Concept War. Their Concept Core, Wanambi, is there collective mind itself and it decided it could survive even if it meant moving to a new world.”

“So they’re a nomadic race, are they? …That’s a lot different from those that clung to their own world to the bitter end.”

“They had a lot of freedom in that way, so it’s still a mystery how Old Sayama managed to guide them here.”

Sayama then heard Yukio say they were helping her.

The feeling that gave him was not bad and a sudden thought came to him.

*…This is so easygoing.*

He had expected the blank period to have a darker atmosphere what with the impending fight against Top-Gear.

Regardless, this was still a place meant to prepare for that fight.

*I suppose everyone is different,* he concluded and looked forward again.

Chao brought her cup to her mouth, sipped, and took a breath before speaking.

“You know, that idiot Kaoru managed to contact the other side with a group from 10th.”

Yukio collapsed onto the console again.

“Ahh,” she began. After a pause, she continued. “Top-Gear is asking for either me or Asagi-kun to visit, aren’t they?”

“They technically only asked for your generation as a group, but it’s obvious what they want. They’re afraid of you since you entered Babel and built this facility.”

“Getting into Babel was a complete coincidence for both Asagi-kun and me. We still don’t know how why we can get in. …So I’m not sure what to say when that’s why they’re interested.”

Her words brought Sayama’s mind to the surface.

*…They don’t know why they can get in?*

That was written in the report, but the inclusion of “still” suggested they had done so more than once.

She had likely done so to complete her concept creation theory and build this facility.

And she said more while still lying on the console and stroking her cup.

“It was supposedly created in Top-Gear, so if only they still had some information on it.”

“They must be desperately searching through their history. But…”

“Babel is a really old artifact. …You know the result of the tests on its exterior, don’t you?”

"You said it has no concept of time, right?"

"Yes," confirmed Yukio while slowly sitting up. "The inside is still functioning without any corrosion. It was clearly built by humans… or at least intelligent lifeforms the same size as us. And to gain the most space inside, the walls are used as the floor via gravitational control."

"That's what you said. And there's enough space for an entire city inside, right?"

"We saw what must have been a park and residential area. Most of it was made from natural materials though, so it had rotted away."

She smiled bitterly and lightly tapped the console.

"But everything made from inorganic materials was still up and running and there was something much like this. Its design was more refined and efficient, though. …If only we could take that equipment outside, I'm sure it could create concepts right away."

"What, do you want to take the negative concepts out of Babel? Or are you going to lug all that equipment out on your own?"

"Couldn't I get Asagi-kun's help?"

Yukio shook her chair, placed her hands on the console, and gave a small smile.

"This must be tough for Top-Gear. Something they made is being studied by us…and it's sure to be the key to our confrontation."

"It's best not to think about it too much. In the off chance the positive concepts are annihilated by the negative concepts, your concept creation is needed to create new power."

"I wonder if I'm trying to play god by doing this?"

"Don't say that when you pretty much already are, idiot."

"You're right." Yukio smiled. "But I'm really interested in the idea of god. …For example, who created the concepts in the first place?"

She turned toward Chao as she spoke.

"Do you know why Top-Gear is so afraid of Low-Gear?"

"Isn't it because of Babel and you? If we can create concepts, they lose the advantage the positive concepts give them."

"But we have the positive concepts, too. Not all of the Gears have sided with UCAT yet, but we can always negotiate with them to borrow their Concept Cores."

"You make it sound easy."

"Yes." Yukio looked up at the ceiling and shrugged. "Guessing at the construction of the concepts for the Gears we don't have the Cores to is really hard. I have to look through all of the records on past battles with them. It would be a lot easier if we could just negotiate for the Cores."

"That's the opinion of someone working on this here. More importantly, are you going to answer your question for me?"

"Oh."

Yukio lowered her shrugged shoulders.

Sayama's mind recognized the motion as one Shinjou made.

*…Why Top-Gear is afraid of Low-Gear?*

Yukio held out her right hand and raised three fingers.

"Your answer of Babel is part of it, but there are a total of three reasons they fear us. The first is Babel and the second is a fact they stumbled upon when searching for any records of Babel in their world."

Her eyebrows bent a little.

"Their world lacks the Biblical mythology."

"What?"

Sayama's mental heart leaped when he heard Chao's question.

*…Top-Gear lacks the Biblical mythology?*

*Why is that?* he wondered.

*…And what does it mean!?*

As if to answer his questions, Yukio leaned forward a little and smiled.

"Old Sayama and the 10th people who have visited have yet to notice because they're focused on the negotiations and not doing any sightseeing. But think about it. If Low-Gear's various mythologies come from contact with the other Gears, the Biblical mythology would not just be the historical truth of Top-Gear; they would be what made Top-Gear itself. In other words…"

"Top-Gear should be the world of the Bible, but it's just a normal world much like this one."

Having said that much, Chao gasped and Yukio gave a troubled smile.

"If it was the world of Biblical mythology, they could just check their history to learn about Babel. If those myths were existing things there and not just something from the past, there would be

existing objects to act as records and they would still be using similar things. …Assuming their culture or civilization was never lost, that technology would still exist there," said Shinjou. "But Top-Gear wants Asagi-kun and me. …Yet to Top-Gear, Babel should just be a relic of the past. Why do they want to hear from people who went inside it? If Top-Gear had Babel's knowledge as part of their living mythology, they would be able to create an even greater Babel…and they would have attacked us as soon as we entered Babel."

"But that didn't happen, so…"

"Yes." Shinjou got up and held her cup in front of her waist with a smile. "I think Top-Gear lacks the Biblical mythology. For some reason, they seem to lack something we have. That is why they cannot find any ancient records for this. They have lost the clue they need to create Babel, despite having supposedly created it in the first place. And that is why they fear us. They fear that the Biblical mythology they lack will become the strength that defeats them. … After all, it is one of the things Low-Gear has that they do not."

She moved her right hand by lowering the last of the three raised fingers.

"And there is one other thing Low-Gear has that Top-Gear does not."

"Is it another mythology?"

"No." Yukio shook her head and smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered. "I still do not know what it is. …Most likely, no one knows. But I do know that it is something that Low-Gear and only Low-Gear possesses."

"Hm? …There's something like that in this negative Gear?"

"There is." Yukio's smiled changed. Her eyes bent and the ends of her eyebrows returned to normal. "I want to know what it is and that is what I'm working on. I believe it is directly linked to the meaning behind Low-Gear's existence."

Sayama heard confidence filling her voice.

"I believe it is a value given by god that allows this world to exist despite being negative."

*…Value? Low-Gear has something like that?*

As Sayama asked that, his mind's vision grew dark.

He was returning to the present. He was waking from this brief

and important dream.

And as he fell into that dozing darkness, he thought.

*…Top-Gear lacks the Biblical mythology.*

But Yukio had said Low-Gear possessed something the other Gears did not.

He had another thought as well. Yukio had realized so very much, so…

*…Why did she go to Top-Gear?*

He suddenly sensed something in that thought.

Shinjou Yukio had to have had a reason for going to Top-Gear.

He felt that her actions and deeds were a common thread connecting everything they had discovered about the past.

"Then were we right in thinking that pursuing Shinjou Yukio is the key to reaching Top-Gear's destruction?"

Would they be able to find a truth that allowed them to oppose Top-Gear?

"Let us follow her path and her deeds."

With those words, Sayama's mind awoke.

# Chapter 15

## “The Ordinary Extraordinary”

I thought
I understood
And finally, I decide

●

A room had a blackboard on the wall and several lines of desks.

The desks and chairs were filled by boys in black school uniforms and girls in navy blue uniforms.

However, the back of the far left row by the windows contained a color not seen in the rest of the room.

Everyone else's hair was black, but this girl's short hair was blonde.

The nametag on her uniform said Heo T.

Heo placed her notebook, textbook, and pen case on her desk before facing forward.

The windows on the left side of the classroom provided a view of the courtyard and the back of Building B. The classroom was located on the third floor of Building C, which was the farthest north of the buildings.

Despite the view of the gray sky, the air conditioning kept the chill out.

*…It's actually a little too hot inside, so sitting by the window feels nice and cool.*

With that thought, Heo began copying down what the teacher wrote on the blackboard.

This was modern Japanese class and they were working an interpretative problem.

She enjoyed class. She learned a lot and…

*…It helps me forget about last night, at least a little.*

She remembered what Harakawa had said as he left.

He had told her to stay away from the Leviathan Road because she was safe.

He had said someone who was safe did not need to head into danger.

*…But…*

She wondered what she was supposed to do if she saw something she wanted to protect in that danger.

She did not know the answer and that was why she had said nothing as he had left.

She suddenly realized something from that. *Oh,* she told herself.

*…He left because I couldn't give him a proper answer.*

In that case, had her anger been nothing but a misplaced outburst? She had already consumed a lot of their snacks, so…

*…C-calorie-wise, I've made a horrible mistake!*

*No, I'll be fine. I'm still young,* she told herself just as she heard a voice.

"Heo? Troubled? Troubled?"

Surprised, she lifted her drooping head.

She looked around, but no one else had noticed the voice. She could only hear the air blowing in from the heater and the teacher's chalk scraping on the blackboard.

She also heard the occasional turning of a page in a student's notebook, so she relaxed her shoulders a bit.

*…Looks like they didn't notice.*

Her usual bag sat to the left of her desk, but she had brought an additional black backpack today and it was slightly opened.

A green point peeked out of the backpack. It was the nose of a plant creature.

The nose moved back and forth as if sniffing around and Heo whispered at it.

"Um, sorry, but I'm in the middle of class right now."

"Outside."

The creature unexpectedly began to leave the backpack as if peeling it away.

"!"

Heo frantically grabbed its shoulder and shoved it back inside.

"S-sorry, but it isn't quite time to come out yet."

"Heo? Panicking?"

*…Yes, I am!!*

For the time being, she zipped up the bag with the creature's nose sticking out.

She quickly looked around, but she only noticed a few people giving her curious glances.

They seemed to think she had only impulsively decided to take something out of her bag.

She nonchalantly faced her notebook again, stretched her back, and picked up her mechanical pencil.

She steadied her breathing and began copying down her notes again, while fully aware of the gazes on her.

*…I-I'm a delinquent. I really am a delinquent today. How could I bring an animal to school!?*

When she thought about it, she realized not even delinquents brought animals to school.

Plus, this was not an animal. It was the resident of another world.

*…I-I've packed up what you could call a person. …I'm a world-class delinquent!*

But this was part of her job as a member of Team Leviathan. The plant creature had showed up at her home, asked for her specifically, and asked to redo their negotiations.

Kazami had contacted her that morning and given her the following advice after hearing about the situation:

"Try to get along."

That was about as vague as one could get and Kazami had also told her that Hiba and Mikage had been taken to the hospital the night before and that Top-Gear had stolen 3rd-Gear's Concept Core.

It also seemed Sayama and Shinjou had arrived at Izumo UCAT.

That meant Heo had to deal with this on her own.

She could not leave a guest alone all day, so she had brought the creature with her.

"Heo. Water. Water."

The worst part was its need to soak up water once an hour, so she quickly raised her hand.

"Excuse me! I'm not feeling well."

Her elderly female homeroom teacher smiled bitterly.

"Miss Thunderson, don't push yourself too much in your everyday life."

The others gave her looks of pity, so she began to worry just what kind of character they saw her as.

At any rate, she left the classroom with the plant creature's backpack in hand and she made her way to the building's central hallway.

She opened the girl's bathroom in the cold air and entered a stall.

She closed the pale green door and opened the toilet lid.

"U-um, you need water, right?"

She pulled a thermos of hot water from the backpack's side pocket.

She then opened the backpack and the plant creature pushed its way out.

It bent itself toward the center of the open toilet.

“Water.”

“Y-you mustn’t use that water. You mustn’t.”

She gave the creature the same lecture for the third time that day and placed it across the toilet.

It placed its six feet along the open toilet seat and she poured a cup of the thermos’s hot water over it.

“Feels good.”

By the time the water passed through the plant creature, it had lost its heat.

The splashing sound would continue until the water ran out.

Heo breathed a sigh of relief that she was pulling this off.

*…D-dealing with other worlds isn’t easy.*

She stretched while making sure her back did not touch the wall and the creature asked a question.

“Heo? What were you doing?”

“Studying Japanese.”

“Japanese?”

“That’s this country’s language.”

“Hard?”

She knew what it meant. They spoke directly via thoughts, so they used what one could call a perfect language. From their perspective, having to use many different languages might sound like a lot of hard work.

“I think it’s a lot of fun.”

“Then 4th boring?”

Heo gasped at that tremendous reversal.

She started by making sure she maintained her smile.

“Heo. Sweating.”

“Y-yes. It’s a very unpleasant sweat, too. N-no, you don’t need to absorb anything from me. You don’t. Th-this much is normal for me.”

*I can say some bold things when cornered, can’t I?* she thought while finding an answer.

“4th’s language is fun too.”

“Why? Only one.”

Heo thought about the plant creature's use of the word "one" and she chose her words carefully.

"In that case, languages are a means of conveying your thoughts, so Low-Gear's languages and 4th-Gear's language may take different forms, but they're the same kind of fun in the end."

After a while, the creature answered.

"4th and Low-Gear the same? Why?"

She knew the answer to that thanks to living in Harakawa's home.

"Because we're living together. Languages are meant to convey thoughts to each other, so even if they take different forms, they're the same if we can properly convey our thoughts."

"Living together makes the same?"

"Yes, together makes the same."

*I'm speaking like it now,* she thought with a bitter smile.

"Even if we're different, we can be the same."

"But Harakawa not together. Not the same?"

The ends of her eyebrows lowered at that question.

The plant creature had not seen Harakawa. She did not know where it had learned about him, but it was bothered by the fact that he was not with her.

Why was he not with her?

That was the question she most wanted to know the answer to.

*…Why?*

However, she had to be a proper representative of Low-Gear when speaking to the 4th plant creature.

If 4th-Gear viewed Harakawa and herself as Low-Gear, then they were going through a slight civil war. She believed that it was only a temporary split and that it would not be permanent.

"Harakawa isn't with me for the moment."

"The same, but not with you? Always?"

She almost answered "maybe", but…

"…"

She swallowed the words. She wanted to say no and she tried to come up with an excuse for doing so.

*…Oh.*

After a realization, she gave her answer.

"Perhaps."

“Really? Heo and Harakawa are not together?”

“Yes, perhaps.”

She gave a clear answer.

“But perhaps not.”

“Which one?”

Her voice was steady as she replied.

“I don’t know because it’s up to me.”

She was not sure, but she had a feeling this was the answer. She felt like this would lead her to the answer.

…*Yes.*

If Harakawa had rejected her, she had to figure out why and fix whatever she needed to fix.

She had ended up crying because she had not tried to figure out what it was and she had assumed there was nothing wrong with her.

And as soon as she realized that, a knock came on the stall door.

“…!?”

The plant creature was not done with its water, so she was thankful she had locked the door.

“O-occupied!”

“Is that you, Heo T? Are you okay?”

The voice belonged to her class’s health committee member.

Heo nodded at the nickname her nametag had produced.

“Y-yes, I’m fine. What is it?”

“Our teacher told me to go check on you, Heo T. You’ve been talking to yourself a lot today and doing weird things. …Are you sure you’re okay? I’m been, um, hearing quite a lot of, uh, water in there.”

“Ohh…”

Oddly calm thoughts of “that’s a misunderstanding” and “what should I say?” entered her mind, but her silence must have worried the girl.

“U-um, Heo T? By any chance, d-did you really have to go?”

“Eh? Well, um…”

Heo looked down at the plant creature standing across the toilet and accidentally spoke aloud.

“This big green thing wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Eh!? Have you been eating a lot of fiber and a lot of beta-carotene-rich vegetables!?”

“Ah! N-no, ignore that! Ignore that! I didn’t say anything!”

“No, Heo T. You need to take care of this properly! Go to the infirmary and get a suppository!!”

“Suppository?” asked the plant creature.

“I-it’s a type of medicine,” replied Heo.

“Ah, Heo T’s talking to herself again! Teacher! Teacher! Heo T’s in trouble!”

Heo brought a hand to her forehead as she heard the bathroom door open and footsteps run out into the hallway.

“Today’s troubles are getting going earlier than usual…”

“Heo T?” asked the plant creature.

“Um, yes. Some people say my name that way.”

She sighed and touched the plant creature.

It had already gone through all the water.

●

Shinjou and Sayama stood in a dark corridor.

Shinjou held a fist-sized stone. It was the Messenger of Wanambi, but…

*…It’s warm.*

The hard stone was emitting a gentle heat from within.

*…It’s been cold lately, so it would be nice having something like this under the covers at night.*

Meanwhile, she saw something up ahead.

It was a long white console with a bookshelf and a cupboard for dishes.

“My mom’s workplace.”

The coffee cup she had seen in the past was in the cupboard.

She hesitated briefly.

“…”

She placed the stone on the console, opened up the cupboard, and pulled out the white cup with both hands.

It was cold, but she felt an imagined warmth in it.

The ends of her eyebrows lowered as she held up the cup and lowered her head.

“She was here.”

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes and she realized how prone to tears she had been lately.

So she breathed in, tensed her gut to hold in the tears, and embraced the cup.

"You can cry if you want, Shinjou-kun."

"No."

She forcibly shook her head, causing the drops in the corners of her eyes to waver.

"We're going to Sakai. I'm sure I'll cry there, so…I don't want to cry until then. That way I can cry a whole bunch."

She raised her head and forced a smile. *The tears never left my eyes, so it doesn't count as crying, right?* she told herself as she wiped at her eyes.

She then gently set down the cup on the console.

"Are you sure?" "You won't take it?" "Belongs" "to" "Yukio"

"My mom didn't leave this for me and she didn't spend her time with it after I was born. It belongs to her from the time she was here."

"Tes" "Understood" "Yukio" "Different" "Shinjou" "Name" "Name?"

"Sadagiri," she said firmly.

After a while…

"Shinjou" "Sadagiri" "Shinjou" "Yukio"

And…

"Individual" "Inherit" "Understood" "Tes" "Testament"

She nodded at that with a smile.

"Thank you."

"Thank you" "Thank" "Thankful" "Grateful" "Great" "Amazing" "Maze" "Labyrinth"

"Does your excess intelligence sometimes send your associations out of control?"

"Sorry."

And then…

"Speak to ourselves" "Happens a lot" "Try not to" "Endure" "Entertainment" "TV" "Video" "Osaka" "Arm"

They started playing shiritori.

*…I feel like I could watch them all day, but have they always been doing this?*

She imagined Wanambi and them all rapidly playing shiritori to increase their heat while living in their empty world during the

Concept War.

*…Actually, where did they learn that game?*

*Probably Sayama-kun's grandfather or my great-grandfather,* she decided.

"I wonder if my great-grandfather was like your grandfather, Sayama-kun."

"Sh-Shinjou-kun, please do not insult your ancestors like that."

"Insult" "Insulate" "Insulation" "Too cold?"

"No, no. I'm fine," answered Shinjou as she rubbed the head of the stone in front of her.

She then looked up.

Sayama did the same next to her.

They both looked to the darkness beyond the console.

In their dream of the past, it had been filled with a jungle of piping and walls of giant tanks, but now…

"What is this empty space?"

A spherical area fifty meters across was gouged out of the darkness.

The empty space had eaten into the surrounding machines and pipes as well. The neighboring machines and tanks all had the edge of a sphere torn into them and their internal components were exposed.

Shinjou could only think a massive space had utterly vanished.

Some panels were laid out at the bottom of the empty space to create a level area and futons were laid out on them. The automatons hiding out below ground were likely using it as a place to sleep.

"I bet that higher bed with a canopy is Miyako-san's."

Miyako's voice reached them from the distant entrance.

"Don't go peeking at our stuff!"

Shinjou tensed her shoulders and grabbed onto Sayama's arm.

She questioned how they were supposed to investigate this area without seeing the beds, but…

"What is this hole? It wasn't there in the dream, was it?"

"No," Sayama shook his head and Baku emulated it from his head.

Suddenly, a voice reached them from further in.

"This was the result of creating a concept and then eliminating it. That prevented the facility from ever being used, but it also means

the concept creation theory was completed."

Shinjou turned toward the voice coming from down the corridor and the voice continued.

"Hi. You've seen a lot here, haven't you? So can you tell me what you think of it all? Has it cheered you up and made you feel like you can keep going after all? Has it?"

The owner of the voice appeared from the darkness.

"That guy in the white suit."

"That's right. The name's Izumo Retsu, so try to remember it if you can. I'm more famous than my son, after all. Anyway, since I fell down, I decided to wait for you on my way back up."

The elderly man in a white suit revealed what he was hiding behind his well-built back.

It was a white, A4-sized touchpad, but…

*…It has the same cowling as a concept weapon!*

*In that case,* she thought.

Retsu smiled. It was a troubled smile with lowered ends of the eyebrows.

"8th-Gear's Wanambi is in here. You can carry it back with you and complete the Leviathan Road on your way."

His tone made it clear there was a "but", so Shinjou stiffened.

Sayama spoke up as if responding to her tension.

"You sound like you have something else to say."

"I would expect no less of Old Sayama's grandson, Mikoto-kun. … Yes, there is something I want to say and something I want to ask."

"Tell us what you want to say first."

"I will." Retsu nodded and looked to Shinjou. "Shinjou-kun, now that you have come here and seen that large empty space, have you noticed a certain mystery?"

Before she could ask what he meant, he looked to the large hole, narrowed his eyes, and continued.

"That was 1st-Gear's writing concept. It was a pre-existing concept, but it was created as an original rather than a copy. But to make sure the double presence of that concept did not destroy the world's balance, the concept created inside of an experimental concept space grew negative and caused that."

"Then…my mom really did create a concept?"

"Yes." Retsu's voice was quiet and he stared into the distant

darkness. “By constructing a theory based on the available data, she created a working theory.”

Those words led Shinjou to realize what he meant by a mystery.

There was indeed a mystery here. If her mother had successfully created a concept…

“Why was the facility below Okutama never completed?”

They would have had all the data and her mother would have had her theory near completion.

“Why?”

“That is simple. She went to Top-Gear and…she made some clever alterations to the data she left behind.”

His use of the word “alterations” left her speechless.

However, he looked her way and spoke with a calm expression.

“I feel like making a joke here. Should I?”

“No. I think that’s due to the pervert genes of the Izumo family, so just keep talking.”

Retsu hung his head and sighed, but he quickly looked back up with a troubled expression.

“Well, anyway. By the time we checked over the data, it was too late. Once we had reason to doubt some of the data she left, all of it started looking suspect, so Asagi-kun decided to end the project. All that remained was the wasted facility on Japanese UCAT’s sixth basement…and the fact that Low-Gear was in trouble.”

“B-but why? Why did my mom do that?”

“I don’t know. I’m not your mom, so I can only guess.”

She fell silent at that and he shrugged.

“Was that a little too harsh for you? But it’s the truth. And none of us know why it happened. Was she telling Low-Gear to die? Or did she not want Low-Gear to use concepts as a weapon? That’s for you two to find out.”

“For us to find out?”

“None of us want to remember those times, but you want to investigate it, don’t you? And you’re their kids. You have more right to know and to think about it than I do.”

With that said, Retsu straightened his back, tossed up the PDA in his hand, and caught it.”

“I just gave you ‘the past’ as a gift. So next…”

“You want my brilliant self to give you ‘the present’ as a gift?”

asked Sayama.

"That speeds things up." Retsu smiled and brushed a hand through his gray hair. "Yes, I just have one thing I want to ask you. …If, hypothetically, Top-Gear turned out to be 100% in the right, would there be any point in lending you Wanambi? There wouldn't, would there? So I want to ask you why you would borrow Wanambi and complete the Leviathan Road if Top-Gear is in the right. Or to put it more bluntly…"

He took a breath, spun around for no reason, and pointed at Sayama.

"Prove to me you can complete the Leviathan Road even if Top-Gear is entirely in the right!"

●

Shinjou thought about what Retsu's question meant.

*…That's what Sayama-kun was talking about, isn't it?*

She remembered their conversation on the emergency staircase the day before.

*…He told us he has a last resort against Top-Gear.*

It was something that even Sayama had referred to as "treading on thin ice", but that was exactly why it was a last resort.

*…What is it?*

Sayama crossed his arms in the face of his questioner.

"Father of Izumo, what a silly question. What if I were to say I simply hate quitting something without finishing it?"

"Your need to ask 'what if' is enough to know that isn't the case. Get on to what you really think."

Shinjou was taken aback by Retsu's reasoning.

*…He isn't letting Sayama-kun have his way.*

*I probably would have fallen for it,* she realized.

"Mikoto-kun," said Retsu with a bitter smile.

"Please, there is no need to use '-kun'. You can simply call me 'Mikoto-sama'."

Sayama ignored Shinjou's glare and Retsu's bitter smile grew.

"Then, Mikoto-sama, I'm sorry to say that I've known your father and grandfather for a long time. I've come to learn quite a few verbal tricks in that time. …Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Yes. You are saying you have an overabundance of terrible

memories.”

“Wow, the grandson’s the same? That’s three generations in a row!!”

“Heh heh heh. It won’t be long until Shinjou-kun and I produce the fourth generation. Prepare yourself.”

That comment surprised Shinjou.

She took a step back and brought a hand to her chest.

“But they’ll be like me too. Then again, your side might be so strong it overpowers my side.”

“Hmm. I seem to have misspoke, Shinjou-kun. That is not what I meant. I would want our child to have your beauty, eroundism, intelligence, hardworking spirit, rejecting acceptance, and blessing from the butt spirit.”

“I’m not sure all of those are compliments.”

At any rate, Shinjou pointed down the corridor.

Sayama looked down that way and saw Retsu crouched down and playing shiritori with the Messenger of Wanambi.

“Fox. Ha ha ha. How do like the suffering of all these x’s? …Oh, are you done over there?”

“Yes, can we continue speaking?”

Retsu nodded and stood up. He looked over at them from his great height.

“Right now, my stupid son’s bridal candidate says the other kids are renegotiating with the other Gears. So you can finish the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear, learn of the past in Sakai, and put together a plan to deal with Top-Gear. …But when are you going to handle 9th’s Leviathan Road? 9th is pretty much the Army’s main force. And…”

His mouth opened wide and bent up in a smile.

“When are you going to do Top-Gear’s Leviathan Road?”

That question brought something to mind for Shinjou.

*…First, Kazami-san and the others have to defeat the other Gears in their rematches to preserve the previous parts of the Leviathan Road.*

“And if we finish the Leviathan Road with all of the Gears except for 9th-Gear, which was the Army, and Top-Gear…”

*…The Gears will either take Top-Gear’s side or Low-Gear’s side.*

She quietly spoke her conclusion aloud.

"The world will split into two factions which can meet for a negotiation."

She brought a hand to her mouth and raised her voice to a yell.

"Every Gear can gather and hold a negotiation over whether Top-Gear or Low-Gear is right!"

"Indeed," agreed Sayama. "We can create a venue for more than just Top-Gear's view!"

He looked to Retsu.

"No matter what sort of righteousness Top-Gear has on their side, we can hold it back. …No matter how righteous the past may be, it is limited in number. If a greater number support the present's righteousness, the past's righteousness has no choice but to restrain itself!"

"You mean you won't let the past rule unopposed?"

"Yes. I do not yet know what form this meeting will take. I do not even know if Top-Gear will agree to it, what topics to discuss, or how to set it up. Not knowing if such a thing can be arranged at all is the biggest challenge at the moment."

Based on their periodic contact with the others, they knew 3rd-Gear's Concept Core had been stolen, 4th was renegotiating with Heo, and 2nd was still a mystery. There were too many unknowns for concrete plans at this point.

"Also," said Sayama. "At that meeting, we will be competing with Top-Gear to see who is in the right. We just received a large hint from Shinjou Yukio's past, but we must solve those mysteries in our negotiations with 8th and the further information on her we find in Sakai."

Shinjou listened to him talk about her mother.

"We must face whatever led up to Top-Gear's destruction and determine the truth."

She gave a deep nod at that because the past he was searching for was closely connected to her.

*…I want to find the truth about my mom and the others.*

Sayama smiled a bit and nodded toward her.

"Yes," he began. "We know two things for sure. First, the end of the Leviathan Road comes at the conclusion of the Leviathan Road meeting where each Dragon's representative is gathered. And second, we will use the past and future we have gained to battle

Top-Gear there."

He extended his left hand toward Wanambi in Retsu's hand.

When Retsu saw his outstretched hand, he showed off his teeth in a smile.

"An excellent idea. In that case…"

Just as he was going to say something more, he stopped.

*Eh?* thought Shinjou as she noticed where he was looking.

*…Below?*

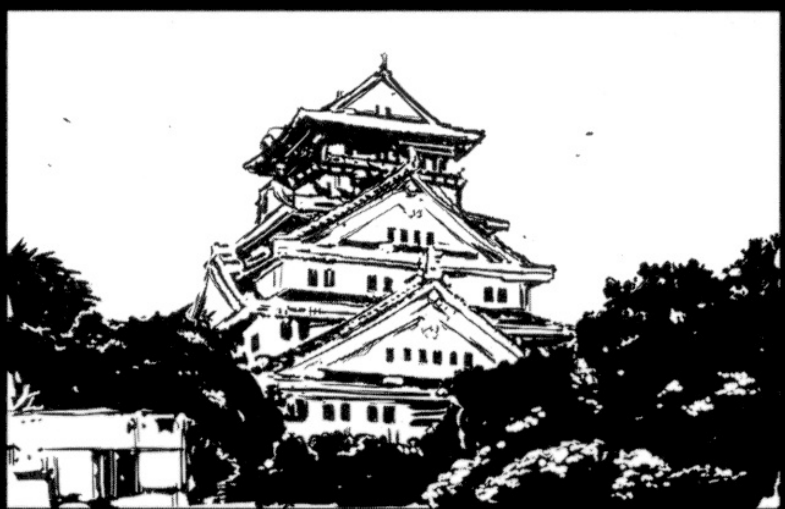
She looked at his feet where the Messenger of Wanambi's sand was forming letters.

"Hurry it up" "Hand it over"

"It sounds a little like the yakuza," commented Shinjou as Retsu reluctantly and silently passed them Wanambi.

# Chapter 16

## “What One Has While Alone”



By realizing I had a thought
I realized I could think
That is why realization is said to be a virtue

●

The north wind blew down from the gray sky and filled a plaza.

The plaza was divided up by a moat and white walls.

A giant structure filled the center of the plaza.

The structure was a castle.

It was Osaka Castle.

Quite a few tourists looked up at the castle tower and its aqua-blue tiled roof.

Below the castle, Osaka Castle Park was split up by the waterways and walls. That winter afternoon, it was filled with tour groups and couples.

At the north end of Osaka Castle Park was a bridge crossing the northern moat and allowing passage to the city.

The cement bridge had wooden railings and it gave a view of Osaka Castle's north side.

From the north, the castle was backlit by the sun, so it was covered in shadow.

However, one person did look up at the shaded castle.

A girl in a black suit stood at the center of the bridge, leaning against the railing.

She had a large white dog with her which was staring up at her as if waiting to be fed.

However, the girl was not looking at the dog. She frowned and glared at the letter in her hand.

It began with "To Mikoku" and it was the one that had been attached to a knife.

"I am about to go steal 3rd-Gear's Concept Core. Team Leviathan's negotiator and Shinjou plan to complete the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear before visiting Sakai. Confront them and tell them what we intend to do once we have 3rd-Gear's Concept Core. It is up to you to decide what exactly that will be. If anyone is to gather us together, it has to be you, the one positioned directly below Master Hajji. Give this careful thought."

Mikoku summed up what the letter told her:

"I'm supposed to think about how we will use 3rd-Gear's Concept Core to confront UCAT?"

She looked up into the gray yet bright sky.

“But why is she making me the leader?”

She had her doubts about that.

Tatsumi had her easily beaten in both combat skill and popularity.

She had been late to make her debut in the Army and she was still mostly viewed as everyone else’s junior.

Tatsumi said she had been chosen due to her position below Hajji, but she only had that position due to her young age at Top-Gear’s destruction and her need for someone to look after her.

It was still a mystery whether the others would accept her as leader.

*…I hope she is not simply shoving this onto me because she does not want to do it herself.*

Regardless, Tatsumi had undoubtedly taken 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core.

She would not say she would if she could not. Some might call her manly, but Mikoku had tried that once and ended up knocked seven meters backwards by a wooden sword jab to the forehead.

Some might say she could not take a joke, but Mikoku had tried that once and ended up meeting a similar fate. Mikoku decided not to continue digging through her memories of Tatsumi.

“Now, then.”

She sat on the railing and set down the bag containing her extra clothes.

*…3rd-Gear’s Concept Core, huh?*

That could strengthen Typhon, Alex, and the dolls, so it could be seen as the most useful of the Cores for Tatsumi and the others.

*…And she’s left it to me to decide how to use it against UCAT.*

She could imagine the scene. The factory manager and the others would be maintaining Alex and such somewhere and Tatsumi would show them Keravnos.

“Finding space for this is a lot of work,” she would say. “I hope Mikoku does something about it soon.”

That was exactly the sort of selfish thing she would say.

“But how am I supposed to know what to do with it?”

Should they hold 3rd’s Core hostage and demand they hand over the other Cores?

Should they trade 3rd’s Core for Hajji and the prisoners?

Should they use 3rd’s Core as a weapon and battle UCAT once

again?

*…Or…*

Mikoku did not know what was best, what made the best use of their resources, or whether she should be the one deciding this.

There was also more she did not understand.

"Shiro."

She spoke to the dog that had circled in front of her and he suddenly stood up as if to embrace her.

"Ha ha ha. You've been play-biting me so much lately, but have you finally accepted me?"

However, he was unexpectedly heavy, so she lost her balance and started to fall backwards.

"Nh."

She took a position much like throwing Shiro backwards in a front suplex.

"…"

And they endured. She kept herself from falling backwards and Shiro stretched out so he would not lose his balance.

The two of them maintained their position for five seconds. Then ten. And thirty. Finally, a contest of force vectors was established.

"Nwah!!"

And she forcibly returned Shiro to the bridge like swinging down a hammer.

*…Did it!!*

The two of them gasped for breath while holding each other in their arms on top of the bridge and its railing.

"Sh-Shiro, try not to play around too much."

The dog's entire body was tensed up and he was obviously not going to nod in agreement, but he seemed to have learned the danger of that situation.

He quickly tapped her shoulders with his front paws, so she let go of him and he panted while lying down on the ground like he was wilting.

Seeing that reminded Mikoku of Shino.

*…I wonder what she's doing.*

*That worry is probably a sign that I'm dependent on her,* she thought, which only depressed her further.

She seemed to have entered a negative cycle and she knew

perfectly well why.

"I have lost my confidence, haven't I?" she asked Shiro.

The dog raised his lowered head.

He seemed worried about her which lightened her mood a little, so she spoke quietly.

"The thing is, I once thought I was the very strongest."

She brought a hand to her chest.

"My mother made me this philosopher's stone with a regeneration concept inside. I will never die with it, so I assumed I would always win in the end."

She smiled bitterly.

"But you know what? That does not meant I will win in the end. It only means I will survive to the end. I cannot believe this," she said quietly. "To win when necessary and give victory to someone, I need my skill. This philosopher's stone is only a part of that skill, but not all of it."

She reached for the cloth cover leaning up against the railing next to her.

And she looked up at Osaka Castle.

This castle had also existed in the Top-Gear Osaka she once lived in.

It would have been destroyed on that final night.

Everything in their city had been.

*…Including my parents.*

Her parents had been concept and philosopher's stone researchers and their concept research had led to her mother embedding this philosopher's stone in Mikoku's chest.

Despite knowing it was a misplaced complaint, she held a hand to her chest and thought to herself.

*…Would I have been stronger without this stone?*

"I am awful."

But it was true she had little aversion to the idea of death. She had to accept that fact in order to improve herself and there was no real reason to hate that stone which was a part of her, but she could not help but wonder "what if".

What if she had been a boy? What if she had been taller? What if she had been stronger? What if Top-Gear had not been destroyed? What if she had been more-

“What would have happened?

There was no one here to answer her questions.

“Because I am all alone now.”

She stepped down from the railing, sensed Shiro standing up at her feet, and looked to the false version of a destroyed castle.

She would travel to Sakai now.

Sayama and Shinjou would arrive there that night with 8th-Gear’s Concept Core with them. They would be there to learn about Shinjou’s past.

Tatsumi expected Mikoku to face them there and announce how they would be using 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core. Would she seek a rematch, the release of the prisoners, or something else?

*…I somehow doubt I will find a very good answer.*

She turned her back on the castle.

She was glad she had stopped by here instead of traveling directly to Sakai. The names of stores and surnames on houses were different, but the place had still brought back a lot of sentimental memories.

“It is time to go, Shiro.”

As soon as she faced the streets of Kyobashiguchi, a sudden voice reached her.

- **—Metal is alive.**

A moment later, she realized the enemy was here.

●

Gyes had detected Mikoku the night before.

She had noticed while taking Miyako and the Moirai back from Yokosuka via god of war.

A bullet train had been travelling east through the mountains below them, so Miyako had leaned out from the god of war’s shoulder.

“Go, Gyes! Pass it, pass it!”

Gyes had responded by passing the bullet train at extreme low altitude.

A child had noticed them out the window and Miyako had struck a triumphant pose, so Gyes had frantically sped up and away from the

train.

*…It was then!*

A familiar concept reading had come from somewhere within the train and that reading belonged to the killer of her fellow Hecatoncheire.

“Toda Mikoku!!”

Currently, she looked down from the top of Osaka Castle which was surrounded by a concept space.

The castle’s shadow fell on the bridge over the northern moat where Mikoku and a dog looked up at her.

Gyes leaped down regardless.

She used her gravitational control to quickly descend toward her target.

She was glad she had checked for the girl based on the bullet train’s schedule. She had been unable to resist saying she had business to take care of and leaving Izumo UCAT that morning. She regretted missing her chance to say hello to Sayama and Shinjou, but…

*…This is a personal battle!*

Gyes accelerated and swung her arms backwards.

She did not bother drawing the swords from her suit.

She summoned her god of war straight away. And…

“Go, swords!!”

She drew the six giant swords from her fixed concept space.

She sent those half dozen blades forward to attack.

She swung her arms down as if to strike Mikoku.

And the swords flew.

●

Meanwhile, Mikoku took a defensive stance and breathed in slightly.

She was somewhat panicked. This had come suddenly and she knew she had let her guard down for anything to seem “sudden”.

However, she knew she was still fine.

She was inexperienced and she tended to use that as an excuse, but she knew she could still fight.

She knew she had to be stronger than before.

*…I can win!*

With that thought, she gathered strength in her legs.

Her aim was simple.

*…I will counter her attack.*

As Gyes dropped down from above, she swung down a giant attack.

So Mikoku would quickly fall back to dodge Gyes's blades and then step forward for a counterattack.

Gyes's actions had a flaw. She was assisting herself with her gravitational control, so she could not immediately shift into her next movement upon finishing this one.

Once Mikoku saw through the swords' movement, she could duck through them and charge forward. That way, she would not need to jump over the holes smashed by the massive swords and she could always regenerate if one of the swords did graze her.

*I will be fine,* she told herself. *I can manage on my own.*

With that thought, she opened the cloth wrapper in her hand.

She pulled out a Japanese sword treated with philosopher's stone and tried to draw it.

終わりのクロニクル

"…!?"

But for some reason, the sword did not move even with the usual flick of her thumb against the guard.

*…Eh?*

It felt less like it was glued in place and more like this was a single object with no blade that was never meant to be drawn in the first place. More importantly, she had not expected this at all.

"————"

*I cannot fight like this,* she thought, before immediately erasing that thought from her head.

Nothing but a question mark filled her mind. She tried flicking the guard with her thumb again, but it remained motionless.

"What is-…"

She tried to ask what was going on, but then she saw a small form sitting where she had not long before.

It was a childish form in a maid uniform. It was a girl with blonde hair.

She was looking over at Mikoku.

"Sorry, sorry. Are you panicking?"

She lowered the ends of her eyebrows in a bitter smile.

Only then did Mikoku realize she had no idea what to do.

She was trying to fight back against Gyes and that much was right, but she could not draw the sword she had pulled from its cloth wrapping.

*…I cannot do something I assumed was a given.*

The path to victory she had painted in her mind had been closed off.

If she could draw the sword, she could bring that victory into reality, so her thumb was entirely focused on flicking up the sword's guard.

However…

"Sorry. Gyes said some confusing stuff about this being a personal fight and not a duel. And well, I used to play with Aigaion a lot too, so…"

The girl raised her hands which seemed to be grabbing an invisible tube in midair.

"You won't be able to draw that," she said with a troubled smile.

Mikoku realized the six giant blades were descending from

above.

●

The six swords split the concrete bridge.

“————!?”

And they sliced through what stood on the bridge as easily as slicing through empty space.

The first two severed Mikoku’s arms at the shoulder, sending them flying. The blades went on to slice through her feet, smash the concrete, and pierce through the bridge.

A solid sound filled the air, Mikoku’s left arm flew with the Japanese sword still in its grasp, and the next two blades dropped down.

Those two both split the front half of Mikoku’s body. They sliced through her lungs and every last rib and slid down the inside of her thighs while tearing a bit into the bone.

Soon thereafter, the final two slammed into her. And they used the back of the sword.

The rapidly falling blades provided blunt but powerful impacts that contained enough force to smash what remained of her.

She had already been sliced apart by the previous swords, so her left side, right side, and inside splattered everywhere. The inside was especially bad. The impacts on the left and right caused her insides to burst.

“————!!”

As the bridge began to collapse, Mikoku let out a scream mixed with the color red.

Her voice rang out.

The sounds of impact joined it.

But the bridge did not collapse. The girl sitting on the railing held out her palms.

“That was for Aigaion.”

She scooped her hands upwards to preserve the shattered bridge.

With her limbs scattered through the air and across the ground, Mikoku was released from the impact and began to fall.

“!”

But she was stopped.

Gyes had pinned her in midair with a sword through the abdomen.

"This…"

Gyes spread her arms wide to either side and nine swords spread out behind her.

"This ends here, Toda Mikoku!!"

With that shout, she used her gravitational control to stab Mikoku with the nine swords.

However, Mikoku was not yet dead. She was still conscious, still breathing, still pumping blood.

The blue light of a philosopher's stone shined through her tattered clothing at her chest.

"I can still…"

Mikoku managed to speak. To keep her consciousness from fading in the intense pain, she spoke aloud to herself without understanding what exactly she was saying.

"I can still make it…on my own…"

She spat out some blood with those words and tried to hold on to her consciousness.

"Yes, you have that regeneration ability. You may regenerate quickly when healing a single body part, but it takes time to regenerate everything."

Gyes saw several colors and objects gathering together atop the bridge that remained standing despite collapsing. They were reconnecting into a single body.

"You are defenseless during that time, but Aigaion did not know about your ability and assumed he had won. That led him to let down his guard and lose. But you know what? If he had known, Aigaion could have killed you."

"Kill…ed…?" weakly asked Mikoku.

"Yes," replied Gyes. "All one has to do is destroy that philosopher's stone in your chest."

Mikoku trembled at those words.

She tried to twist around and bend over.

"!!"

But something pierced through her head from front to back.

She had tried to bend over and hide her chest, but the impact caused her to bend backwards instead.

She felt like her thoughts were knocked out the back of her head and she saw a maid sitting on the ground beyond the bridge.

The maid had short hair, sharp eyes, and a needle in her right hand.

A rapidly fired needle was what had pierced through Mikoku's head.

"…!"

Still bent backwards, several hundred needles stabbed into her, fixing her in midair.

At the same time, something moved from below the bridge and into the air.

The giant object turned out to be a blade.

The six belonging to Gyes's god of war were stacked up on top of each other. Together, they formed a single extra-thick sword.

They sent a roar through the air as they dropped down as a massively heavy blade.

Their target was the philosopher's stone in Mikoku's chest.

At the same time, Gyes jumped on top of the six combined swords.

She added on her own weight to accelerate them further.

"Do not worry! I will make sure not to harm your face any further!!"

●

Mikoku saw it.

There was nothing she could do. She had lost most of her body, most of what even formed thoughts had been smashed, and she could only think vaguely about the scene before her eyes.

Her thoughts never actually stopped. They simply relaxed and allowed what was hidden in her heart to spill out.

*…Ah.*

She saw a giant blade.

It dropped from the gray sky and a woman stood on it.

It had a machete-like tip and the corner was falling straight for her chest.

*…Sto-…*

She tried to say "stop", but her mouth would not move.

She could only think "stop" and "no" like a child while twisting her nonexistent body.

The sword arrived.

*It can't be,* she thought. *Why?* she asked.

*There is no avoiding it,* she also thought.

*…No…*

Her eyes saw the blade dropping from the gray sky and the shadows of the surrounding buildings.

Those buildings were the castle and the more distant city.

Long ago, she had lived in a similar place, her parents had been with her, and she had had plenty of friends.

She had always been taught they were in the right. When she had asked why, she had been given the following answer:

"Because we are trying to accept everyone."

Her young self had accepted that answer.

However, her mother had embedded a certain stone in her young chest.

Afraid of the pain, she had resisted the idea, sobbed, and cried, but after being drawn in by sweets and dolls, she had undergone the surgery.

Three days later, the world had been destroyed.

All that had remained were the other members of the Army and this.

However, a lot of those others had been captured.

Shino had likely gone wherever it was she wanted to be.

Mikoku was now alone.

She was alone, she could do nothing, and a sword was about to smash her to pieces.

*…No.*

She finally let out a voice. However, there was no strength behind it and she could not even reject anything that was happening.

"No!!"

Her shout was answered by the blade colliding with her chest and her body being torn apart.

But just before that, she remembered a great many things: her father's face, her mother's face, her friends, her life in Noah, the city she had lived in, the people she had lived with, herself as she had lived there, and…

*…Shino.*

She cried out the name of that girl who was no longer by her side.

However, that cry was never heard.

The lungs that would produce it had been sliced apart.

●

The afternoon sunlight reached a certain location.

A materials storage area was filled with the colors of shadow.

An area of a forested mountain slope had been dug out, pillars driven down, and a metal roof added.

It was big enough for three large dump trucks to fit inside.

However, it was currently filled by something other than trucks, sheet metal, or other materials.

It contained a metal dragon and a white steel giant.

A girl sat on top of the crouching dragon that was colored red, white, and blue.

The girl stared forward at the white giant kneeling in one corner of the dark storage area.

No, she was actually looking at the men in work outfits surrounding the white giant.

“Manager, how is it? Can you get it moving?”

“Can’t you tell at a glance, Tatsumi? This isn’t a pendulum and there are no spares, so it isn’t moving right away.”

“I see,” said Tatsumi.

The mechanical dragon she sat on raised his head slightly.

“How was the enemy?”

“Nothing worth mentioning, Alex. But if I had to say something… troublingly weak. I need him to be strong.”

“Strength is quite a complicated topic.”

“Is it really? I don’t think it’s that-…”

She trailed off and looked down at a small object touching her shoe.

It was a bolt. It had likely been holding on one of Alex’s parts, but it had come free of its nut.

However, she placed the bolt in her pocket and waved down below.

“Manager, one of Alex’s bolts has-…”

“Typhon comes first,” replied the manager.

“But Alex is alive.”

“Stop it, Tatsumi,” cut in Alex. “You make it sound like I will fall apart from losing a single bolt.”

“But,” she said with a frown.

“This much is nothing to worry about. …I am in far better shape than when the negative concepts washed over me and left me on the verge of death. I have to thank your mother for replacing my dying body with this.”

“Your body was remade, but it’s still falling apart. This bolt may look perfectly normal on the outside, but it will fall right back off even if we put it back on.”

“That is the dreadful side of negative concepts. My actual body has grown almost entirely negative. It is merely being held at bay with new bolts added onto the outside.”

After a pause, Alex continued.

“But without this body, I never would have met you and I would have died. So the only thing I can do is continue on such that I leave no regrets.”

“…”

“That is nothing to fall silent over, Tatsumi. And more importantly…”

He turned his head toward the corner of the storage area.

Beyond the white giant named Typhon was a pile-driver wrapped in blue chains.

“You brought it back with you, but aren’t you going to attach it to Typhon?”

“Mikoku will decide that.”

“I wonder if she is doing well.”

“She isn’t at all. I tailed her and did a little dance behind her, but she didn’t react. I even played ding dong dash at her hotel room and she didn’t notice a thing. …She’s doing much worse than before the battle,” quietly said Tatsumi. “With Master Hajji and Shino gone, she must think she’s alone. She thinks she has no allies and the only people left are enemies or people who force troubles onto her.”

A voice answered her from below. It was the manager who was brightly lit by his welding.

“Tatsumi, how about you quit teasing her and teach her a thing or two?”

“She’s far past the point where she can be taught. Even when it comes to fighting, she can think for herself now.”

“Then why is she feeling so down?”

“She has no confidence,” declared Tatsumi as if she had seen it

for herself. “She had always relied on others to provide her a reason for her actions. She had always entrusted herself with Shino, Master Hajji, or even us, so she has no idea what to do now that she’s alone and without a set goal.”

Tatsumi brought a hand to her neck and smiled bitterly.

She then crossed her arms, looked down at Alex’s face, and narrowed her eyes.

“But what do you think someone’s true strength is?”

“That would be their own strength as opposed to something given to them by anything external,” answered Alex.

“Then is a fighter only demonstrating their true strength if they fight barehanded?”

That question silenced Alex.

Tatsumi laughed, crossed her legs, and swept a hand through her hair.

“Mikoku still has allies.”

“Hm? Even though she has no one nearby?”

“You have allies, too. So do I and so does everyone else. That’s how I see it anyway. Everyone has at least someone who will unconditionally side with them no matter what,” said Tatsumi. “And Mikoku’s case is more powerful than anyone else’s. She has simply forgotten about it and lost her nerve. And remember one thing, Alex.”

She nodded.

“One’s true strength is what is hidden inside them and forgotten.”

●

The impact sounded like music to Gyes’s ears.

She loved these sounds of slicing and destruction.

It felt like the commotion of the old festivals of the gods condensed into a single instant.

The sound carried into the distance and rose into the sky. The wind created by the moving blades and shattering impacts felt wonderful and the splattering chunks acted as proof of her fun.

And if it led to victory, that was all the better.

Mikoku’s philosopher’s stone had undoubtedly been smashed.

Gyes had felt the hit and she had confirmed it while compressing her combat speed several thousand times.

Mikoku was dead.

*…No, I killed her.*

Was this her first time to lay a hand on someone from Top-Gear?

Or had she unknowingly done so in the past?

She did not know, so she chose not to think about it and lowered her shoulders.

She began to switch her body parts from combat mobility mode to normal mode.

"——————"

But she suddenly realized that something was not right.

She was standing on the stack of six swords, but her vision was located too high.

*…That means…*

Something was supporting the swords from below.

She tried to peer down to see what, but something stopped her.

"Sister Gyes!!"

She heard Moira 3rd's voice and she saw Mikoku's body in the spot the six blades had struck.

Mikoku wore the tatters of her clothing and almost seemed to have grown up from the ground.

"She's regenerating!?"

*…Impossible!*

The philosopher's stone had been broken. She had felt it happen through the blades. And yet…

"…!?"

Gyes saw Mikoku's philosopher's stone supporting the tip of the fallen blades.

The pinky-sized blue stone had definitely broken

"That blue light…"

Despite being broken, it was emitting light.

*…It's repairing itself!?*

Gyes understood what Mikoku's philosopher's stone was doing.

"It regenerates both her body and itself!?"

That stone could regenerate itself.

It was likely a product of combining concepts from 3rd and 10th.

It was a philosopher's stone that could only have been made in Top-Gear.

*This is dangerous,* warned Gyes's artificial mind.

However, she did not know where exactly the danger lay.

She saw no problem in the fact that this philosopher's stone could regenerate itself.

Mikoku's regeneration took time, so she only had to use that time to smash the stone again and destroy the girl's body.

If it came to it, she could drop the girl in a vat of powerful acid or a pool of lava. The stone and her body's regeneration speed would be unable to keep up.

And to do any of that…

*…I need to smash it now to prepare for my next move!*

Mikoku's regeneration was nearly finished. Her body stood as if pulled up by the philosopher's stone. Some gravitational control may have been at work because Gyes's swords were lifted up as well.

Mikoku was not conscious, so Gyes decided this was her chance. But just as she began to take action, she realized something.

Her movements were slow.

*…I'm still using my combat speed.*

She had yet to switch back to normal speed.

That meant everything she was seeing was in the realm of her combat speed.

In that case…

*…I've compressed my speed several thousand times, but her regeneration speed appears unchanged.*

That thought led to a single answer.

Mikoku's regeneration speed was rising. That was the only explanation.

*Why?* she asked.

"Does that philosopher's stone include an evolution concept!?"

She shouted the answer she had reached as a resident of 3rd.

At the same time, Mikoku slowly opened her eyes with blue light filling her chest.

●

Mikoku's vision cleared.

The first thing she saw was a torrent of blue light.

*…Eh?*

The blue stone embedded in her chest pulsated with a piercing light that travelled in every direction.

A forceful wind whipped around her.

As if delighted by that wind, the blue light surged outwards.

*…Why?*

Why was she alive?

There was only one possible answer: a power hidden inside her philosopher's stone.

*…Is this what my parents were researching?*

They had been researching immortality.

However, they had not succeeded. After all, every Gear contained a concept of destruction.

Evolution and destruction were two sides of the same coin, so to hold the possibility of one was to hold the possibility of the other.

Thus absolute immortality was impossible. Instead, they had created a false immortality. Rather than healing the root cause that was destruction, this philosopher's stone filled in the gaps and healed the symptoms of that destruction.

However, there was one thing Mikoku had not known.

*…This stone regenerates me, but even if it is destroyed, it regenerates itself and further evolves?*

She had not known about this ability.

She soon felt strength fill her entire body.

This strength had not been there before. She could begin moving immediately after her resurrection.

Her body was working perfectly and this gave Mikoku a certain thought for the first time.

*…I can fight?*

With this regeneration speed, she could instantly heal any wound and keep moving.

However…

"…!"

At the center of the blue light and swirling wind, she sensed something. A pain was squeezing at her entire body.

Rather than the usual intense pain, she felt like her entire body was creaking.

This hastened regeneration was adversely affecting her body.

That was when she realized why this ability had not shown itself before.

*…I was young, so my parents gave me a slower regeneration to*

*protect me from this pain.*

So why had it sped up now, giving her this pain?

Why had the stone been created with this change in mind?

"…"

She realized she had something after all.

She had been left with something. She had thought she had nothing, but she did have something.

She had this strength.

She had an incomplete immortality concept.

It was not perfect, but it could only have been built up this far inside Top-Gear.

And it was the one thing her parents had left for her.

Even if the world was destroyed, this power would rescue her from destruction.

*…And yet I cried and protested so much back when they were going to give me the surgery.*

She wondered what her parents had thought of her.

She distinctly remembered the sensation of being hugged and told it was going to be okay.

Inside Noah, her parents had sung to her and comforted her along with everyone else and the automaton that managed Noah.

Everything came back to her, both the memories and her body.

As her body quickly regenerated, her mind grew clear.

She could see the sky beyond her pain.

She breathed out into that false winter sky.

The breath formed words.

"Thank you."

She was not addressing anyone in particular.

As if answering her, light and wind blew across her and filled her with strength.

That rising strength was like a voice telling her to wake in the morning.

No matter how isolated she was, the strength of this self-created world would never leave her.

*I was spoiled,* she thought inside the blowing wind. *I was so used to being spoiled that I forgot what it was to think.*

After thinking about herself, she thought about the person she cared for most.

*…Shino.*

Her thoughts continued.

*…Even without you, I will not die.*

So…

"Will you…?"

She took a breath, lowered the ends of her eyebrows, and sounded on the verge of tears.

"Will you be just fine without me?"

Even as she asked that question, she began to move.

A bitter calm filled her heart.

Soon, a thought in her heart rose to the surface.

It was the task Tatsumi had forced onto her. She was to be Top-Gear's leader and…

*…What will I do with 3rd-Gear's Concept Core?*

As soon as she felt she had an answer, she found the solution to it all.

She would settle things between Top-Gear and Low-Gear once and for all. One could call it a last resort.

She decided this was an answer only she could have reached.

A moment later, a large sword arrived within striking range overhead.

Mikoku clenched her regenerated left fist.

She quickly drew the Japanese sword it held.

She was determined to make good use of 3rd's Concept Core.

She took action as the first step toward the last resort she had just come up with.

She intercepted the falling sword with her own philosopher's stone treated blade.

Her sword broke and the cutting concept contained within lost control.

"———!!"

The surrounding space was smashed to pieces and the automaton's gravitational control could no longer support the bridge.

"…!!"

Immediately afterwards, the bridge exploded, sending out a destructive and noisy wind.

●

Gyes closed her eyes against the wind.

Mikoku had finished regenerating, so she would have easily been able to see through Gyes's attack.

She could have readily made a counterattack and no one would have blamed her had she taken Gyes's life.

However…

"…?"

Gyes was still alive.

*Why?* she wondered as she opened her eyes. She looked on the broken bridge and through its gaping holes, but Mikoku was not there.

*Why?* she wondered. *Why didn't she attack me?*

She looked around from atop the stacked swords and below the dry sunlight peeking through the clouds, but both Mikoku and the dog really were nowhere to be found. She only saw Moira 3rd turning her head back and forth to look around.

Moira 3rd also seemed confused by Mikoku's absence.

"What happened?"

She tilted her head.

"That was her chance, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was."

"I know, right? You would've been pathetically cut down while filled with false triumph."

"Don't call me pathetic!!"

She got the girl in a headlock and poked at her, but Moira 2nd silently walked up to stop her.

Gyes sighed.

*…What does this mean? She had the perfect chance to finish me off.*

A broken sword was stabbed into the bridge at her feet.

Mikoku had forcibly scratched at the bridge to leave behind a message.

It said…

"Sorry?"

*Why?* asked Gyes. *Why did she apologize and run off when she had effectively won?*

Unfortunately, Mikoku was not around to answer.
She had left that single word and disappeared.
Only the blowing wind remained.
Only the chilly winter wind.

# Chapter 17

## "An Older Time"

Now, you are here
To test your resolve
To test what you must know

●

Two sets of footsteps walked down a dark corridor.

However, this corridor was not surrounded by walls.

It was located between several partitions and machines.

The footsteps traveled down a path lit only by the small emergency lighting.

One set walked out ahead and the other remained a bit behind.

The leading set was created by a pair of sandals.

“What do you think of the sixth basement, Hiba-kun? …Of course, I only came here for the first time just a bit ago.”

The leading footsteps produced a male voice and Hiba stopped observing his surroundings and faced forward.

“Um, well… It feels like I’m somewhere important.”

Hiba, who wore a blue track suit and a bandanna, scratched his head.

“And I didn’t expect you to be showing me around, Kashima-san. To be honest, I thought I was going to be lectured for losing the Concept Core.”

“Ha ha ha. I can let Kazami-kun and the others handle that. I even have permission to film it. …It’ll probably be rated R15 for violence.”

“Why do you make it sound like that’s a foregone conclusion!?”

“Calm down,” said Kashima, asking the impossible. “Anyway, I’m not really the best person to show you around here. I’ve only walked back forth on this main corridor. This is the sixth basement’s uncompleted concept creation facility.”

Hiba nodded.

He had been told to come here only half an hour earlier, so it had been quite sudden.

Until then, he had been holed up in UCAT’s underground medical room.

The night before, he and Mikage had apparently been rescued directly after Tatsumi’s attack.

He could only say “apparently” because his medical treatment had been complete by the time he came to.

The doctor had said his entire body had been damaged almost evenly. He had apparently fared fairly well for being punched by a

god of war and slammed into the ground.

Charms had been placed across his body and he had been given plenty of medicine.

After half a day, he only felt a lot of fatigue and most of his injuries were beginning to heal.

*…The real problem is…*

Mikage.

She was sleeping on the intensive care bed in a private room at the back of the medical room.

Her injuries had primarily been the broken right arm and the chest wound.

The doctors had said her right arm would heal nicely if she rested for another night.

That made him wonder if they had let his injuries heal more roughly, but…

*…The chest wound.*

The philosopher's stone in Mikage's chest was gone.

Specifically, it had fallen out onto the road. The blue stone had lost its light and split in two.

The wound itself was healing. It was apparently less severe than Hiba's and her head had remained untouched, so she should have regained consciousness before him.

Despite that, she had yet to come to. The Doctor said her brainwaves resembled those of sleep but were highly uniform.

*…Like a sleeping machine.*

He wondered how long she would sleep, but he shook his head because there was nothing he could do about it.

He shook off his unease and looked forward to Kashima's back.

"Um, how far are we going?"

"Just a little further. So do you know where this is?"

Hiba tilted his head at Kashima's question.

All he could see in the darkness and shadows was outdated-looking machinery, but that was only because of their old design.

He had never seen anything like any of them. Several consoles and layers upon layers of piping joined together to create something.

He noticed what he had previously thought was a wall was actually a number of tanks measuring several hundred meters tall.

That was when he realized how massive this facility was.

He maintained the tilt of his head.

“Isn’t it a facility for creating concepts? That’s what you said.”

“Sayama-kun called after obtaining Wanambi and you heard what he said about why this facility is here and why it was never completed, didn’t you?”

“I suppose,” said Hiba noncommittally while thinking.

He had received a regular check-in from Sayama and according to the past that Sayama had seen below Izumo UCAT…

“Shinjou-san’s mother left behind altered data, right? She destroyed the facility below Izumo UCAT and left the people of Low-Gear with a…false theory?”

“Sayama-kun speculated that Shinjou Yukio could not stand to have the concepts used as weapons, so she altered the data on her theory before leaving for Top-Gear. That way, no one could use concept creation for war.”

Kashima took a breath and scratched his head.

“It is true that Shinjou Yukio seems to have gone to Top-Gear and tried to create a space for Low-Gear there. So…”

“Even if she was doing it for peace, it must have been a shock to the people she lied to.”

Hiba knew how Sayama and Shinjou lived at school. And he knew their parents had spent three years at that same school.

*…Being lied to by someone like that couldn’t have been easy.*

*Then again, Izumo-san and Sayama-san sometimes lie to each other.*

*I guess everyone’s different,* he thought. But then he remembered the past scene of Shinjou Yukio he had seen in the Kinugasa Library. What he had seen there made it hard to believe she could lie, but he wondered if that was his weakness for girls showing through.

“She was really committed to her decision, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.” Kashima nodded deeply and stopped up ahead of Hiba. “Now, then.”

He scratched his head as Hiba caught up to him.

Once he did, Hiba saw what lay ahead of him.

“A metal bed.”

“Do you know what this is?”

"Um…"

Hiba thought. He thought deeply and added on an additional ten seconds before clapping his hands.

"Yes, it's a new SM device, isn't it?"

"Ha ha ha. Hiba-kun, you really are a member of Team Leviathan, aren't you?"

"O-oh, god. You think I'm like them!"

Kashima smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. We will all accept you as you are…while keeping our distance."

"I don't think you've fixed the misunderstanding at all."

"Calm down." Kashima nodded and looked to the two meter metal bed ahead of them. "Listen. It was only for a short time, but this place was made to store the Concept Cores to help build the concept creation facility. And since everything has been left untouched since the Concept Cores were stored here…"

He lightly tapped the bed, producing a metallic ring.

"This bed is the same as the one built into Susaou's bridge to seal 2nd-Gear's Yamata. …This is where Mikage-kun originally slept."

●

Hiba listened to Kashima.

"When Shinjou Yukio analyzed 3rd-Gear's concepts, she must have used the concept reading coming from Mikage-kun as she slept here. Also…"

Also…

"Mikage-kun was being treated as a mere concept container, so Hiba Ryuuichi may have wanted to take her in and that may have been the condition used to get him to fight for UCAT. …That's my guess anyway."

"…"

Hiba was left speechless and Kashima turned toward him with a hand on the metal bed.

"If I'm right, why do you think your father wanted to take Mikage-kun in?"

"Are you saying you know why?"

"No." Kashima hung his head and shook it. "But I feel like I might. I'm a father too, after all."

“So it has to do with videos?”

Kashima gave Hiba a serious look and frowned.

“Hiba-kun, this is hardly the time to be discussing that. …Videos should be discussed in a calmer setting. Also, the lighting in here is awful and the sound is far too lively.”

“Yes, I guess you’re right. I really don’t care anymore, so can we get back on topic? Sorry.”

“You have a habit of not taking people seriously, don’t you!?”

Hiba nodded twice and tried to keep his cool.

“I’d love to see some of your videos some time.”

That put Kashima back in a good mood, so he nodded, tapped on the metal bed, and resumed speaking.

“I think your father was trying to protect Mikage-kun. He saw her as a person instead of a Concept Core.”

“But he died in that battle.”

“By that time, he already had you.”

Kashima turned toward Hiba.

“As a father, I feel like I understand what it means to have a child you can leave things to.”

With his eyebrows lying flat, he looked straight ahead and asked a question.

“Have you protected the person he left to you? …I would never leave Harumi with a boy who couldn’t protect her. So what about you? You couldn’t protect her, could you?”

“Well…” muttered Hiba before clenching his fists and breathing in.

He knew the answer. He had not been able to.

But just as his regret began dragging down his thoughts, Kashima said something more.

“Do you want the power to protect her?”

“Eh?”

Hiba frowned.

What did Kashima mean by that?

“W-will you be giving me some kind of weapon? Like an ultimate Cowling Sword called the Goddamn Slayer!?”

“No, no. Not even I am that overly creative. You need something else right now.”

Kashima smiled.

"You need to make *yourself* stronger."

His light comment contained a very simple idea.

*Oh,* thought Hiba as he realized his thoughts had been running in fruitless circles. He lowered his shoulders a little before speaking.

"If only I could do that…"

If he could do that, he would not have lost to Tatsumi.

*…How can I get as strong as her?*

He and Mikage used Susamikado, a top-class god of war.

But as humans, they had been no match for Tatsumi.

And that led him to a certain fact.

*…I won't be able to protect Mikage-san from anyone on Miki's level.*

He gulped at that conclusion and Kashima gave a deep nod in front of him.

"I understand your concerns. To put it on words…you were having dirty thoughts, weren't you?"

"N-n-n-n-no!?"

"Uh, why was that a question?"

"W-well…"

Hiba briefly grew flustered. His thoughts had been perfectly serious, so why had he been unable to show any confidence in himself?

"I-it's possible my adolescent skills have manifested themselves on a subconscious level. In other words, my mind is always in firing mode, so I can't even trust myself!"

"I see." Kashima pushed his glasses up his nose. "Can I ignore that?"

"Go right ahead."

They both sighed, let their shoulders droop, and hung their heads.

After a while, Kashima looked back up.

"Anyway," he said while scratching his head. "How about we begin training?"

"Training?" asked Hiba as he too looked up. "Is there a 36th Chamber of UCAT or the UCAT Wooden Men or something like that?"

"No, but a personality modification room is in the works. We received quite a few requests to make one for UCAT Director Ooshiro."

“Oh? Just out of curiosity, what does it do to people?”

“They stop moving.”

“I think you’re modifying something more fundamental than their personality!”

“Calm down.” Kashima smiled bitterly. “At any rate, do you want to get stronger?”

“I…”

He nearly gave a noncommittal answer, but stuck a hand in his pocket instead.

He found two stones there.

They were the two broken pieces of Mikage’s evolution philosopher’s stone.

He wrapped his fingers around those solid shapes.

*…If I’m going to make sure this never happens again…*

“Yes.”

He answered on reflex. And…

*…Ah.*

Even he was surprised that he had answered so honestly.

*Will this really work out?* part of him wondered. *But…* said another part of him.

The night before, he had only been able to collapse onto the road with Mikage in his arms. He recalled that fact and nodded in his heart.

He really did want to grow stronger.

Meanwhile, Kashima nodded twice and quoted Hiba’s answer.

“ ‘I…yes’, hm? That is a linguistically odd answer, Hiba-kun. Or were you too lost in thought to notice?”

“J-just tell me how already!!”

Hiba glared at Kashima, but he ignored it, stuck his hands in his pockets, and smiled bitterly.

Afterwards, he softened his expression and faced the boy.

“Sorry about that. It was just such a great response. It showed you have a real reason to want this strength.”

He inhaled and straightened up.

“After all, I once hurt someone important to me and tried to cast aside my power. And I continue to lie even now because of it.”

“Eh?”

Kashima did not directly answer that question.

"I want to know why Shinjou Yukio lied to everyone she cared about. And unlike me, you are the type of person who can get by without lying to Mikage-kun," he said. "So I will give you a chance to fight someone powerful. …You must fight and struggle to grow stronger. That is the greatest way of achieving your goal."

Hiba then heard a new voice.

It was doing an awful job of singing.

"Memories in the distance! Such a beautiful universe!"

The song continued unopposed.

"Once the beam flashes! The northern hemisphere is destroyed! Now, the apocalypse has arrived! But the bikers! And bike shops! All survived!!"

"Th-that's Atsuta-san, isn't it!?"

Hiba saw a man suddenly appear right in front of him.

He had sensed and seen no movement.

*…The Art of Walking.*

"Oh, c'mon. Don't look so shocked when you predicted it was me and everything."

The man's short blond hair and sharp eyes were looking down on him from within arm's reach.

"Listen. The Great Atsuta here is going to give you some training."

His right hand reached for his back and pulled out a Cowling Sword.

It was a bluish-white sword with a long, narrow, and straight blade.

"This is Prototype Kusanagi. …It'll apparently be the greatest masterpiece yet, but it's a little too unstable. I'm supposed to test it out."

"Test it out? You mean on me?"

"Of course."

Atsuta frowned and leaned forward to peer down at Hiba from above.

"Aren't you happy? You can fight a nice battle here. Lose and you'll die, though. …And you know what? If you do die, 2nd-Gear will call that our official punishment for Japanese UCAT's lies and leave with Totsuka."

That meant this battle with Atsuta would be a redo of the

Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear.

But Hiba gathered a bit of strength in his body and took a deep breath.

He looked to Kashima who crossed his arms and nodded.

*…Want to take a stab at it?*

The man seemed to be asking him that and Hiba trembled at the thought.

This had to be what he wanted.

*…I can gain the strength I need to protect Mikage-san.*

That thought settled it for him.

He suppressed the slight tremor that Atsuta's powerful presence gave him and he asked a direct question.

"What happens if I win?"

Atsuta's expression changed.

His eyebrows shot up and he bared his teeth in a smile.

He also tapped Kusanagi against his shoulder.

"You've got guts. I'll have to cut them out of you. Listen up, little monkey. If you beat me, we'll pay you back for the help the girl who slept here gave us in sealing Yamata long ago."

Hiba listened to Atsuta.

"To pay you back, the development department will do everything it can to give you the strength necessary to wake up that sleeping beauty. That'll be enough, won't it?"

●

A curtain kept the setting sun out of a white hospital room. The fluorescent light on the ceiling worked to overpower the scarlet glow of the curtain and the people inside the room cast a shadow both to the east and straight down.

The shadows came from two humans and a creature.

One was a girl in a school uniform sitting on a stool by the window-side of the bed.

She was working on something using the black laptop on the side table.

Next to her, a woman sat up in the bed.

The woman had a creature resting on her stomach. It was a plant creature.

Its fur was made of vegetation and it spoke to the woman in the

bed using its thoughts.

"Went to school. Heo has lots."

"You went to Heo-san's school, didn't you? And she has a lot of friends, doesn't she?"

Heo, the girl operating the laptop, blushed when she heard that.

She grew needlessly flustered and had difficulty coming up with an explanation.

"U-um, how should I put it? It was nothing I haven't told you about, Yui."

"Heo. Heat."

Only then did she realize she was blushing despite having no reason to be embarrassed.

*…I'm not used to having people talk about me.*

She talked about herself a lot. On the days she visited Yui, she would tell her all about school, but Yui would always listen and ask just the right questions. She asked how she had felt about things, what she had thought, or why she had done something. When she gave a good answer, Yui would praise her and rub her head. When she gave a sad answer, Yui would say something quietly and rub her head.

Yui's questions allowed Heo to confirm that she really had been there, so she appreciated it. If she ever had children, she wanted to listen to them in the same way.

But that was all a self-report. Having someone else say what she had done felt kind of embarrassing.

"Sorry about that. …I'm not sure why I'm so embarrassed."

"You're embarrassed that someone else is talking about you?"

She nodded, thought for a bit, and turned to the plant creature.

"If they say something bad, I can always correct them. But when they say something good, I'm not sure how to correct them. It's kind of scary and makes my heart pound."

"So it's a sort of verbal humiliation with you?"

"Verbal humiliation?" asked the creature.

It took three minutes to correct it and prevent that unnecessary knowledge from reaching 4th-Gear as a whole.

Afterwards, Heo sighed.

"What about you, Yui? If you hear something really, really good about me, but I say it isn't true…would you feel disillusioned about

me?”

As soon as she asked that, a weight reached her head. It was Yui’s hand and the fingers slipped into her hair.

“Heo-san, would you really be able to tell me it wasn’t true?”

Heo thought for a bit before answering.

“Yes. Unfortun- ah.”

She was interrupted by her surprise at having her head rubbed.

She narrowed her eyes and her shoulders trembled at the ticklish feeling on her scalp.

“Um, why? I just said I was a hopeless girl.”

“You know, Heo-san? I won’t be disillusioned to find you aren’t what people say you are. But I would be disillusioned to find you cared more about what people say you are than what you really are.”

“…”

The rubbing hand eventually slowed.

“I like honest people. I like people who don’t lie, can apologize when they do something wrong, and think doing the right thing is so natural they don’t feel the need to tell anyone about it.”

“R-really?”

Heo raised her head and Yui nodded.

“Is there anything you aren’t telling me?”

Heo panicked.

*…Something I haven’t told her!?*

*There’s a lot of that. Will she forgive me if I tell her now? Well, this isn’t very much, but she probably wants to hear about it. Um, uh…*

“L-last night, Harakawa said he didn’t want me!!”

“My, how awful. He deserves to be executed for that.”

“N-no, I already got back at him plenty! I ate all the snacks he had bought, I stayed up late, and I ate the cake meant for both of us!”

“Oh, my. You’re such a delinquent. How many calories in the cake?”

“W-well! It had a whole 666 calories! Kazami would have committed seppuku if it were her!”

“You really are a delinquent, Heo-san! You’re on an entirely different level. You’re a mega-delinquent!”

“Yes, I am a delinquent! And not just a mega one! I’m a giga-delinquent! S-so I even wore Harakawa’s shirt and slept in his futon last night!!”

“You wore my son’s shirt and slept in his futon!?”

“Y-yes, and on my back!! It was a reverse full-body prostration!”

“A face-up reverse!!”

The plant creature responded to this.

“Morning. Heo hugged futon. Called for Harakawa.”

“Y-yes, I did! I don’t remember it, but I was probably talking in my sleep!!”

“You pass!!!”

Yui rubbed her head hard enough to rock it back and forth.

*…Huh? That wasn’t just being honest.*

“That was revealing everything…”

“Don’t come back to your senses now, Heo-san. You need to get even more worked up!”

The woman, girl, and creature clenched their fists, lowered down, and gathered their excitement.

After about half a minute, Yui straightened up and smiled.

“Things are so fun with you around, Heo-san. There’s plenty to look forward to now.”

“Why do I feel like I just made the mistake of a lifetime?”

“Heo T? Worried? Worried, Heo T?” asked the creature.

“Heo T?” cut in Yui.

“Heo called that at school.”

Heo was embarrassed and worried Yui would find it childish.

But the woman seemed to realize where the nickname came from. She looked to her uniform’s nametag before speaking.

“I see. I guess that would make me Yui N, but that doesn’t flow very well.”

Heo tilted her head when she heard the initial N.

“Why N?”

As soon as she asked, both the questioner and the questioned realized something.

For Yui, this was probably her first time letting that slip. For Heo…

*…That’s Harakawa’s late father’s name!*

*I shouldn’t have asked that,* she realized while panicking.

She quickly smiled and waved a hand back and forth.

“U-uh, then why not use the initial from Harakawa? You would be Yui H-…”

She had dug her own grave. [1]

Her hand and smile froze in place and Yui nodded.

The woman gave her a serious expression and picked up the plant creature so it would face her.

She then spoke to the creature.

“Heh heh heh. Heo-san just misspoke. If being Heo Thunderson makes her Heo T, being Harakawa Yui wouldn’t make me Yui H. And once she becomes Harakawa Heo, she’ll be H Heo.”

“H Heo?” asked the plant creature.

“Yes, H Dan and H Heo will make a wonderful H pair! Hooray, so much H.”

As she listened to the woman and creature’s conversation, a cold sweat poured from Heo’s smiling face.

*…This is a test! This is a test I have to endure after messing up twice!*

But the test suddenly crumbled away when the plant asked a question.

“Harakawa important to Heo?”

However, it was not facing her. It asked Yui.

“What does Yui think? Harakawa important to Heo?”

*…Eh?*

Heo saw Yui smile as the plant creature continued.

“Yui different from Heo. But understands Heo,” it said. “Heo and Yui similar to 4th.”

“Ah.”

That syllable escaped Heo because she felt like she had realized the purpose and meaning behind her renegotiation with 4th-Gear.

The plant creature had not come for a dispute or “just because”.

*…It wants to know if we truly are complete individuals.*

Everything in 4th-Gear was either the manager Mukiti or the single entity that made up the entire world.

To them, a fellow member of your race was another part of you that shared your same mind.

*…They see someone trustworthy as a being that shares your mind.*

4th-Gear's creature did not understand, but it was definitely interested. It wanted to know if people could understand others in Low-Gear.

"Heo. Lots of friends."

And…

"Friends worried. Asked Heo 'are you okay?' "

The creature called for her.

"Heo T."

"…"

"Used different name: Heo T. But still worried for Heo," it said. "Strange. What is Heo? Heo and others not together, but the same. Why? Where is the real Heo?"

Heo decided to answer that question. She placed a hand on her chest and said what she wanted to say.

She faced the plant creature and Yui as she spoke clearly to make sure it understood her.

"I am right here. But…"

She smiled.

"I am not here."

*Huh?* she thought. *I feel like I just said something strange.*

But she also felt this was the truth.

Long ago, she had made a certain decision when faced with a battle.

She had thought of her mother and the others she had lost, she had thought of all they had left her with, someone important to her had hinted at it, and she had desired to fly.

There had been no need to think about people who were no longer with her, but she had anyway.

*…They aren't here, but at the same time, they're here with me.*

And so she asked Yui a question.

"Who is 'Heo' to you?"

Yui lifted up the plant creature and turned it toward herself.

"My Heo is the same as the Heo you saw. She cares for my son, she trusts him even when he pushes her away, and she trusts in the fact that she has him."

"Everyone has everyone!?" asked the creature.

"Yes," replied Yui. She lowered it and rubbed its head. "We have you as well. So you too are both here and not here."

“The same!”

The creature’s fur stood on end and it shook its body.

“Yui, the same. Heo, the same. Harakawa, the same. Heo! Heo T!”

Heo nodded at its innocent thoughts and it began swaying left and right.

“Heo, the same. Sayama, the same. Shinjou…”

“U-um, let’s not get carried away with who we’re saying I’m the same as!!”

The creature tilted its head and Yui smiled bitterly.

“You’re so cute, Heo-san. Take care of my son, okay?”

There, she suddenly changed the subject.

“How about I tell you about my husband? …It seems my friend won’t stop me today.”

The window was growing dark as the light of the setting sun faded.

The curtain fluttered and Heo realized the window had opened at some point.

Before, there had been an origami crane on the windowsill, but there was a piece of paper there now.

“Herrlich.”

Yui picked up the white paper with that word written on it.

“I hear that boy left for work and hasn’t come back. I bet he was lying about it being for work, but do you know why he doesn’t quit his part-time job at the base when he has his job at UCAT?”

“No…”

Heo shook her head and Yui turned a bitter smile toward the paper in her hand.

“Herrlich,” she muttered under her breath. “That boy is making sure he won’t forget the time when we lived on the base.”

Heo did not need to ask why. She knew Yui was about to tell her that. As for why she would tell her…

“Will you…make me the same as Harakawa?”

“Yes, let’s talk. I’m sure he is learning even more than he already knew right about now. So I will tell you as much as I can.”

Yui’s expression grew serious.

“And all to help you become H Heo!”

●

Harakawa could see clearly as soon as he came to.

That could be due to the light or how clear his mind was, but it was more due to the light this time.

A white fluorescent light shined down on him from a cement ceiling.

He could clearly see the color of that light.

"…"

He vaguely wondered why he was seeing it.

It was on the ceiling, so he had to be facing up. However, he felt no strain on his neck, so…

*…I'm lying down.*

Once his body's senses returned to him, he could tell what position he was in.

"Why am I lying down?" he muttered

"Oh, are you awake?"

He recognized that voice, so he sat up.

A moment later, he felt like his entire body was breaking or like some great impact had hit him.

"————"

"Your bones are all healed, but your muscles have yet to fully recover. I have extended them and set them in place, so forcing them to bend will feel like breaking your entire body."

"…!!"

Harakawa ignored that and got up.

After letting out a breath and sitting up with his disheveled hair, he found he had been lying on a white bed.

He also saw someone in front of him.

"Your name was Roger, wasn't it? …So this is in American UCAT?"

"Testament. You are in American UCAT's medical room below Yokota."

"I see."

He tried to nod, but began sweating instead.

It was a sticky sweat. It felt like his movement had twisted his body and forced out the moisture.

His arms trembled from the shoulder down and he could not

gather strength in his fingers. His back was stiff and he had tense his abs to make sure he did not collapse backwards like a clockwork doll.

The joints of his back were all as stiff as if they were connected by a nail and he had to force his muscles to move properly if he wanted to bend so much as a finger.

But he managed to move regardless. He gathered strength in his gut, slowly but surely pulled back his right leg, and used his hand to move it down from the bed.

"You are very stubborn."

He did not have it in him to listen. He only now realized there were white cloth partitions on either side of the bed.

He was wearing a smock and his clothes were in a basket to the side of the bed.

He put his jeans on first and then removed the smock. As he did, he noticed Roger's gaze.

"Are you interested in guys' bodies?"

"Not particularly. I was just surprised how well-toned you are."

*Ridiculous,* he thought.

Anyone who had decided to live on their own would remake themselves in the same way.

*…But…*

He remembered coming across one person who had not really done that and that released his excess tension.

His relaxed mood must have acted as a sign because he was suddenly able to move his body better, even if a little awkwardly.

"It's cold."

His sweat had rapidly cooled, which meant no more sweat was leaving his body.

He decided to get dressed as quickly as possible, so he put on his leather jacket.

"I had assumed you wouldn't be able to move for another half a day."

"Are you basing that on the records of some little kid? If that's how long it takes your soldiers to recover, it says a lot about American UCAT."

"To be completely honest, I was basing it on myself."

"I get the feeling I can actually talk with you."

Harakawa adjusted his position on the bed and looked up at Roger.

"Will you show me the past?"

"I will not be showing it to you. The sand will."

"You're the one that makes the decision."

He received only a bitter smile in response. Roger pulled a small bottle of sand from his sleeve and held it in both hands.

"This is a blend of sand from Top-Gear…and this base."

"That sounds like a bitter blend."

"Testament. I was right to bring a dummy to the meeting yesterday. I don't have much of this left."

"Left? I hear regularly imbibing the past isn't good for you."

"You are more than qualified to see this."

Roger lowered his hands and placed his fingers on the bottle's lid.

Roger did not ask if he was ready.

He did not even ask why.

It was like Harakawa had shown up just as he had wanted to show off a dream of the past.

It was like this had been predetermined.

It was like this had been promised.

And it was like he knew exactly why Harakawa was here.

"…"

Roger opened the bottle's lid with his fingers.

After the small metallic sound, the man opened his mouth.

"The colonel said to give you what you wanted."

"He probably went insane."

"Testament. Then I too must be insane for obeying him."

"You just do what you're told. Only your commander needs to be crazy. Any more would be too much trouble for the rest of us."

Roger laughed bitterly at that.

It was not a very pleasant laugh, so Harakawa frowned.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing much. I just happened to have a very similar exchange over ten years ago."

"…"

Harakawa felt his hair stand a bit on end and he saw blue sand dance through the air.

"Now, the north wind still seeks the past even after it was

broken, but what will it see there?”

He heard Roger’s voice.

“I hope that the north wind can blow once more.”

A moment later, Harakawa’s mind was taken away.

He dropped to the depths of a dream. He fell into an abyss that began in this base and ended ten years prior.

To learn what happened on that Osaka battlefield ten years ago, he fell.

---

[1] In Japanese, H can mean perverted, lewd, sexual, etc.

# Chapter 18

## “Riddling Moebius”

Important
Person

●

A train raced along below the afternoon sun.

The two-car train was passing through a farming region. The rice had long since been harvested and the drying stands were covered only in straw.

The silver train was decorated with blue lines and it shook as it followed a river along the land.

It would occasionally enter a mountain, run through a rocky river bank, pass through a city, or cross the river.

At the moment, most of the passengers were students and they sat in the long seats on either side or the shorter seats that faced each other. Some of them closed their eyes and slept, some read a book, and some looked out the window.

A similar scene was found in the opposing seats at the back of the second car.

A boy in a suit had a boar-like animal on his head, a girl with long hair had a small stone on her head, and they were both working on something.

The boy was operating a large PDA and the girl was typing on a laptop.

As the scene outside changed from a mountain to a river, the girl suddenly looked up.

“Wow, the scenery just opened up. …We’ve come down a good ways. You could only see the mountains before.”

Her impressed voice led the boy in the opposite seat to look out the window as well. The window provided a view of the western sky.

“That would be due to Shikoku’s geography. Shikoku is a treacherous land. The Shikoku Mountains even contain Mt. Ishizuchi, western Japan’s greatest peak. We are taking the Tokushima Line which drops by about four hundred meters before reaching the ocean to the east.”

“I see.” Shinjou nodded, turned to Sayama, and looked at him and the PDA in his hand.

“Are you talking with Wanambi? I hope so, since we went to all the trouble of taking a seaside route through Shikoku because 8th-Gear’s reservation used to be there and the familiar air might make it easier to speak with him.”

Her laptop responded to her question.

A chat window opened.

“Can I talk?” “I can talk.” “This is Wanambi.” “This is Wanambi?” “This was Wanambi.”

Wanambi had previously figured out how to speak with her via wireless LAN, but Sayama’s PDA was the primary means of communication and they had learned quite a bit already.

Their first surprise had been about Wanambi’s very existence.

*…He only exists in terms of heat and data.*

The Messengers of Wanambi were made up of stones and sand, but Wanambi was a thermal information life form that existed as data within them.

Wanambi was the common factor created by the shared minds of all of 8th-Gear’s residents, so to obtain a portion of him…

*…You need enough of the Messengers of Wanambi to allow him to exist.*

This Concept Core had no real form. It naturally appeared in the shared minds of the 8th-Gear residents when several of them were gathered.

Wanambi was inside the PDA because several of those residents were contained inside it. The left grip of the PDA contained a clear portion much like a test tube and it contained a group of moving sand.

They acted as guides to transform the PDA into a container for their shared consciousness.

That was how Wanambi could manifest himself in the PDA.

Normally, Wanambi would have vanished after they moved a certain distance from the Messengers of Wanambi in Izumo UCAT, but the one on Shinjou’s head acted as an antenna to link the 8th-Gear residents in Izumo UCAT with the PDA.

*…It’s like they’re electronics or something…*

But as they had spoken with Wanambi and the Messengers that were a part of him, they had realized 8th-Gear’s thoughts were not digital. Instead, they were based on the senses.

For example, they loved playing shiritori, but different Messengers would choose different words.

Wanambi would generally choose similar word patterns, but he would occasionally produce an unexpected word or mistakenly

choose a word ending in “n”.

Their thoughts were quick, but unlike automatons, they actually made mistakes.

And that was why they produced heat.

The primary concept of 8th-Gear seemed to make heat into life.

Interestingly, when playing shiritori with Wanambi, repeatedly giving him hard letters to start words with caused Sayama’s PDA to gradually heat up.

“It is strange how he exist as heat itself.”

“Strange?” “Is it strange?” “It is strange.” “That is Wanambi.”

He would provide multiple reactions to a single word because his thoughts came from all of 8th-Gear.

A glance over at Sayama’s PDA showed an icon above the chat window.

It was a rainbow-colored double helix with a black border. That represented Wanambi’s presence and he claimed Shinjou Yukio had supplied the image.

Shinjou Kaname had taught him to speak and Yukio had given him a form.

And just earlier, Sayama had told him about the Leviathan Road.

Sayama had explained the threat facing the world, how they planned to handle that threat, what had happened thus far, and that they intended to gain Wanambi’s cooperation by responding to whatever demands he might have.

However, Wanambi had only been talking about the past and jumping from topic to topic.

That was continuing now as the train slowed in its approach to a station.

“Long ago.” “A mountain near here.” “Monster.” “Field.” “No.” “There was a reservation.” “Our reservation.”

Wanambi’s words were displayed in the window.

Shinjou typed a question back.

“Why did you leave your reservation and move to Izumo UCAT?”

“Research.”

More words followed that first one.

“Top-Gear.” “Top.” “To not be taken.” “Wanambi.” “This is Wanambi.” “Shinjou and Sayama.” “Go with.” “Went with.” “Came with.” “So.” “That is why.”

"You did it so you wouldn't be taken by Top-Gear?"

Shinjou thought.

*…There was a nonaggression treaty between Top-Gear and Low-Gear, wasn't there?*

Nevertheless, Wanambi claimed to have gone with Shinjou and Sayama out of fear of being taken.

That generation's Shinjou would have been Yukio.

"Did my mom take you with her? Or did you go on your own?"

She received an answer right away.

"On our own." "Yes." "Didn't know." "What will happen?" "The future." "But." "However." "Wanted it." "This is Wanambi." "Called fearful." "Called cowardly." "Told it would be fine." "But." "Avoided the possibility." "Didn't want the possibility." "Sayama and Shinjou." "Went with." "Low-Gear."

A short pause followed.

"Once." "Long ago." "8th-Gear." "When we left." "When it was destroyed." "Told it was okay to go." "Given permission." "Said could stay here." "So."

And…

"Shinjou and Sayama." "Shinjou." "Am here." "Don't want to go elsewhere." "Coward."

Shinjou once more saw something she had heard during 4th-Gear's Leviathan Road.

And this time, the names Shinjou and Sayama were in the reverse order.

*…Yes.*

She typed a response to Wanambi.

"You aren't anywhere, and yet you were told to go to Low-Gear, weren't you? So you happily went there. But in the reservation, your concern over Top-Gear grew, so when my mom went to Izumo UCAT, you relied on her and moved there."

"Exactly." "Yes." "The other Gears." "Tried to take us." "Took us." "But only a portion." "For work." "For calculations." "But not just a portion." "Wanambi is the whole." "Didn't tell." "Didn't inform." "But." "Shinjou said." "Come." "With Wanambi."

Another pause.

"Remember." "I remember." "This is Wanambi."

And…

“Taught.” “Learned.” “Game.” “Shiritori.” “Way to kill time.” “Shinjou.” “Kaname.” “Had a child.” “The same as that child.” “The same.” “Was the same.”

“Kaname-san taught you shiritori just like he had his child?”

“No longer cold.” “Could think.” “Could create.” “Heat.” “Warmth.” “Time.” “Created.” “Felt.” “Can feel.” “Learned.” “Learned to wait.” “Was no longer cold.” “Had heat.” “Waited.” “Waited.” “Waited.” “Waited for Shinjou.” “For Shinjou to come.” “Happy.” “Delighted.” “Joyful.”

Shinjou felt a similar joy at reading those words.

Shinjou Kaname's child would have been her grandfather. Around when that child had been born, Low-Gear had contacted Wanambi in 8th-Gear and interacted with him much like teaching language and games to a child.

The other Gears had sought Wanambi's ability to perform calculations before that, but none of them would have taught him language, culture, games, or anything else unnecessary.

The 8th-Gear residents had lived in an empty space where they would enter a state of hibernation if they did nothing and cooled, so what happened if they were taught a "game" that allowed them to produce heat even when they had nothing to do?

And after waiting for someone to play with them, what would they think when that person showed up?

*…They'd be happy, wouldn't they?*

Wanambi had given that same answer with a few synonyms.

At that point, the train came to a stop.

The station's name was related to studying, so students preparing for entrance exams would apparently buy the station's tickets for good luck.

It was a long stop and a few of the doors closed to keep out the winter air.

Even so, the chilly air made it inside and Shinjou became more aware of the train's heater.

Meanwhile, text scrolled along her laptop's chat window.

"But." "Didn't come." "Shinjou." "Shiritori." "Long." "Long." "Long time." "Remembered." "Words." "Wait." "Always." "Waited." "For Shinjou." "And."

"Then Sayama-kun's grandfather came, didn't he?"

"Yes." "Correct." "Confirm." "Indeed." "Was told." "Was said." "Shinjou." "In Low-Gear." "Not lost." "Always there." "So."

Shinjou remembered seeing Sayama's grandfather from behind as he sat alone in 4th-Gear's past.

*…So he was everywhere and yet nowhere, was he?*

The surname Shinjou had been passed on and the surname Sayama had been passed on, so even if those two from the past were gone…

*…A lot remains at UCAT, IAI, and the school.*

"Do you have memories of Shinjou Kaname, too? Will those

memories be around forever?”

“Yes.” “Yes.” “Yes.” Yes.” “Yes.”

Suddenly, Sayama spoke up.

“Shinjou-kun, what did you just ask him?”

“Eh?”

She looked forward and saw shimmering heat rising from Sayama’s PDA.

It had undergone intense heating and the heat was caused by her laptop’s chat window.

The word “yes” continued over and over again so quickly it did not seem to be scrolling at all.

Sayama peered down at it from above.

“Are these the responses of all the 8th-Gear residents making up Wanambi?”

The log file quickly grew into the gigabytes and their roll-call of a response ended only after eating up more than half the HDD.

Shinjou checked the meter showing the remaining space one the HDD.

“Wow. How many Mega Shocks in a gigabyte, anyway?”

“Heh heh heh. Nothing to worry about, Shinjou-kun. Although the next time you ask a similar question, the chat log between you and Wanambi could very well blow out the HDD.”

“I need to be careful,” she sighed while relaxing her shoulders.

She had learned one thing from that answer.

“You will follow the surname Shinjou, won’t you?”

“Together.” “Is here.” “Because here.” “Was here.” “So be patient.” “Was patient.”

“Patient?”

Wanambi answered her question.

“Yukio.” “Left.” “Went away.” “Left us behind.” “Life is nothing but farewell.”

“…”

Shinjou was speechless.

*Oh, that’s right,* she belatedly remembered.

*…My mom went to Top-Gear.*

“I wonder why.”

“Don’t know.” “Do not know.” “Didn’t know.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t apologize.” “Must not.” “Sadagiri.” “Different.” “No apology.” “Wrong to apologize.”

And…

“Promise.”

The text continued from there.

“Promised.” “So.” So.” “So.”

●

Shinjou had definitely seen that word.

“Promise?”

She had previously come across that word in a similar context.

The plant creatures had mentioned it in 4th-Gear.

And so she worked her dumbfounded mind.

*…Did they have a similar promise?*

After that thought, something deep in her heart warned her of danger.

Her experience was subconsciously telling her to be wary of this situation.

*…What is this anxiety?*

What about this situation was dangerous?

Wanambi seemed to adore the surname Shinjou and she sensed no hostility.

But…

“Sayama-kun.”

Sayama looked up. Wanambi’s side of the chat was displayed on his PDA, so he understood the situation.

But he said nothing.

That increased her confidence in her sense of danger.

He was leaving this to her.

And she once more thought about how similar this was to the situation with 4th-Gear.

Back then, Sayama had carried out the Leviathan Road to fulfill the promise.

*So what about this time?* she asked before realizing something.

*…I’m doing the Leviathan Road here.*

She then thought about the word “promise”. When thinking in terms of the Leviathan Road, were these promises only between Wanambi and Shinjou or only between 4th and Sayama?

*…No.*

She thought and remembered. She thought about the pasts she had seen over the course of the Leviathan Road, about the present, about everything, about everyone, about every world, and about every nation.

*…We promised to make them all equal. And…*

"We said we would walk side by side."

At the same time, the train's doors closed.

After a single shake, the train trembled and the scenery out the window began to move.

As they picked up speed, Shinjou asked Wanambi a question.

"What promise did my mom make? What did she promise you when she left?"

"Talked." "Told us." "Lots." "A lot." "The past." "Concept war." "Concepts." "What she saw."

And…

"Taught us." "Games." "Gave us." "New problems." "For thinking."

"New problems? Like a quiz?"

"Yes." "Called them." "Riddles." "When standing." "White." "When sitting." "Becomes red." "What is it?"

Sayama frowned at the sudden question and he wiped sweat from his brow.

"I would expect no less of your mother, Shinjou-kun. What a lewd and adult quiz."

"No, the answer is the sun."

"Correct." "Well done." "Wonderful." "Cheers." "Hooray, burnt noodles!"

Shinjou listened to those words of praise and imagined her mother sitting in a chair and asking the stones riddles.

She had spent her time with children in the orphanage, so playing games like that with the stones may have been a nice diversion from her work.

"So was the promise a riddle?"

Shinjou asked what kind of promise it had been.

"Riddle." "Quiz." "Left with us." "Job." "Think about it." "Think and wait." "Then." "Surely." "Come to see us again." "To tell us the answer." "Shinjou."

"You mean… *If you continued thinking about the answer,* the surname Shinjou would come to see you?"

"Leave with you." "Want to leave with you." "Riddle." "Quiz." "Already met again." "Return." "Riddle." "Could not answer." "Unanswerable."

*Oh,* thought Shinjou. *Wanambi did what Shinjou Yukio told him.*

He had been told the surname Shinjou would come to meet him if he thought about the answer. He had never found the answer, but…

*…He continued waiting.*

By returning Shinjou's unanswered riddle to a Shinjou, he was trying to return to how he was before.

He was trying to return to being by Shinjou's side without having to wait.

So Shinjou asked a question while thinking this must be her Leviathan Road.

"If you give me that riddle and I give you the answer, will you stay with us?"

"Condition." "Continue to wait." "Waited." "The riddle's answer." "Waiting." "Canceled." "Removed." "New Shinjou." "Go with." "Stay with." "Possible." "Discard old condition." "Not a problem." "Will work."

She had permission.

"Waited." "Continued to wait." "So."

After a while, Wanambi continued.

"Erase it." "The condition for leaving." "Please erase it." "Can't find an answer." "Give the answer." So we no longer must wait." "Answer the riddle."

"Okay," said Shinjou with a nod.

She knew it had to have been tough waiting and constantly thinking on that question for over a decade, but she also wondered if she could answer it herself.

*…I need to answer it!*

With that thought, she spoke.

"Please give me that riddle."

"Now, then," said the text as if Wanambi had been waiting to say this. "Time for the next question."

He gave a proper introduction.

"What does this Gear have." "But." This Gear does not have?"

●

Sayama saw Wanambi's question on the PDA.

*…What does this Gear have yet not have?*

Those words reminded him of the past they had seen in Izumo UCAT.

Specifically, something Shinjou Yukio had mentioned.

*…There is something valuable that Low-Gear has but the other Gears do not.*

She had said she did not know what it was.

But a possibility presented itself.

*…Is that the same as this unknown thing that Low-Gear both has and does not have?*

Had she searched for it and found it? And had she then gone to Top-Gear?

While he wondered about all that, he heard a hesitant voice. It came from Shinjou's mouth ahead of him.

"Um…"

She frantically parted her bangs and briefly glanced his way.

However, her expression was not a troubled one.

He made sure to always check her expression, so he knew this was not caused by worry.

*…She is hesitating.*

She was not struggling to find an answer to this question. She was hesitant to answer it.

He wondered what this meant and Shinjou typed on her laptop.

"Are you sure?" she added to the chat.

"?" "??" "???" "Sure?" "Are we sure?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" "Shiritori? "Sand." "Dust."

"Ah, no not that," said Shinjou aloud.

"Shinjou-kun, you have to use the chat."

"Oh, right."

She blushed, faced the monitor, and resumed typing.

"Are you sure I only have to answer that riddle?"

"This." "This is it." "This." Yukio." "Gave it to us." "Promised." "Until solved."

"Then you'll come with us if I answer that riddle, right?"

Sayama looked up when he saw that text.

*…Could it be…?*

Based on what she had said…

“Shinjou-kun, are you saying you know the answer?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry. No, I don’t. But…I think I’ve figured it out.”

He wondered what she meant by that and watched her blush and smile.

“This will be really embarrassing if I’m wrong, but I think it’s right. For one thing, it was my mom that asked. …Sayama-kun, do you remember a certain something that happened between us concerning the Leviathan Road?”

“Something that happened between us concerning the Leviathan Road?”

He thought back to the massive amount of information of the past.

The Kyushu hotel. Night swimming in the Seto Inland Sea on an isolated island. That evening in the dorm before May. The bathhouse during the spring.

He remembered a lot and he used his hands to recreate the respective curves in the air, but he soon realized something.

*…I am imagining a lewd Shinjou-kun!*

*I must not disgrace her in my mind for my own convenience. Only do that when it is necessary!*

But he could not think of a reason why it was necessary here, so he remembered her more serious times instead.

*…Yes, like when she studies at the window-side desk each night.*

He recalled how she sat there in the shirt she wore instead of pajamas.

*…I can always glimpse the skin of her inner thigh below the shirt. After taking a bath, her skin has a way of drawing in my heart.*

“Yes, just like a butterfly.”

“What is?”

“You do not understand?” he asked while standing up without thinking. “This means you are lewd even when you are being serious!! To describe it in a single word, you are lewdrious!!”

“No one would think that meant ‘serious’ too! And how in the world did memories of the Leviathan Road end up there? Honestly.”

She sighed and gestured for him to sit back down.

“Do you remember what Gram said?”

He sat down with the PDA in hand.

Once he settled down, he recited the words in his memory.

*…That was right after we had activated Gram, wasn’t it?*

“Gram checked to see if this world was governed by Low-Gear and said he had slept for nineteen years. And he went on to say we would see the development of history that began with us and ends with ‘that girl’. He called it the history of how everything came to an end or the ending chronicle.”

“Yes, that’s what I remember too. Thanks. I’m glad I could check on that.”

“No need to thank me. You are the negotiator at the moment. But…is that it?”

He had partially realized what her answer was, so he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “What do you think about this idea? Nineteen years ago, my mom was researching the Concept Cores and she would speak with any of them she could, teaching them about Low-Gear. And Wanambi helped her and had also helped the other Gears during the Concept War, so he had a lot of knowledge and my mom would discuss her questions with him.”

“I see. It sounds plausible. …So what happened then?

“My mom said Low-Gear has three things Top-Gear does not, right?”

He gave an expressionless nod and realized she had stepped up onto the same stage of thought as him.

“Continue,” he said and she gave him the words she wanted.

“One of those was the one thing that Low-Gear has but the other Gears did not, wasn’t it?”

She spoke slowly and chose her words carefully.

“Isn’t that a lot like this riddle? And…do you think my mom found the answer to that riddle on her own?”

“We cannot know that yet.”

“Answer me.”

He realized Shinjou had lowered her head at some point.

The way she hung her head and desired an answer reminded him of Wanambi.

Not receiving an answer must have felt a lot like being forsaken.

So he did not hesitate to speak his heart. Because without this

answer, the person before him would not have been there.

"I think she did find it. I think your mother found that answer and the value of Low-Gear."

"I wonder if she really did."

Shinjou gave a small smile and hung her head further.

"I want to believe she did."

She finished speaking and typed on the keyboard instead.

"The answer…"

She typed without hesitation and the words appeared on the display.

"The answer is me."

●

Shinjou thought while typing her answer.

*…I don't know.*

She did not know if this answer was correct.

For one, when her mother had given this riddle, she had yet to go to Top-Gear. That meant Shinjou had yet to be born and her mother had yet to marry.

So this was not *the* answer, but it was *an* answer.

Shinjou typed and spoke aloud.

"Because of my body, I had always thought I was strange for a human of this Gear. But…if my body didn't change, I thought I would be exactly the same as a human from this Gear."

That had left her hanging between the two categories.

"I always thought I both was and was not a human of this Gear."

And…

"I believe I will continue thinking that way."

But…

"I want to stay with this Gear."

Therefore…

"Am I not enough?"

Am I…

"Am I not enough of an answer for my mom's riddle?"

Shinjou had asked a question of her own related to the question she had been asked.

After that, she waited ten seconds.

When nothing happened, she waited another thirty question, but

still nothing happened.

"No reaction?"

Did that mean her answer did not work?

*…Is he cutting off all contact?*

There was no reaction on the chat and she felt a chill in the bottom of her heart.

*Was I wrong?* she wondered. *Maybe I should have expected that to be wrong.*

Was she not allowed as an answer since the riddle predated her?

Was Wanambi shocked that she would try to give that kind of answer?

She felt a beat in her throat and she reloaded the chat screen, but there was still no reaction.

*…Was I wrong?*

She wondered what to do. This Leviathan Road had been left with her and she had taken Sayama's place, but she had made the other side completely ignore her.

"What-…"

Just as she began asking what to do, she sensed some heat.

"Eh?"

The heat came from overhead. She reflexively reached out and grabbed the Messenger of Wanambi.

The Messenger was trembling a little.

*…It's warm?*

Wondering what that meant, she looked up.

She saw Sayama leaning back with his arms spread across the back of the seat.

"Congratulations, Shinjou-kun."

"F-for what?"

She held the heated stone in both hands and tilted her head.

"I haven't gotten the result yet, so it's too soon to congratulate me."

A moment later, a sound reached her.

It was a warning from the laptop. It came from the mail software and she read it aloud.

"The incoming data is too great, so it is has been left on the server."

The amount of mail had gone beyond just gigabytes and it was

being sent from…

“It is from my PDA, Shinjou-kun.”

She peered over and saw a few letters of the alphabet in the mail’s title field.

“Testament.”

Sayama then held out his PDA for her to see. Seemingly handwritten letters were dancing around the screen.

They looked like they were dancing with joy, but they also spelled out words.

“This is Wanambi.” “Starting now.” “From now on.” “Never have to wait.” “This is Wanambi once more.”

Shinjou responded to those words with thanks. Her thoughts had gotten through to Wanambi.

Meanwhile, the train entered an open field.

Past the field, a city could be seen below the setting sun. And beyond it…

“Look, Shinjou-kun. The ocean. That is the Seto Inland Sea.”

Beyond that inland sea was Sakai.

As he looked that way, Sayama opened his mouth to speak to her.

“There, I am sure we will see where your mother ended up in the past. …We will find the ultimate answer in relation to Top-Gear’s destruction.”

# Chapter 19

## “Worn-Out Anticipation”

Do your best

●

Below the darkening evening sky, two men stood in a rectangular clearing made in a forest.

One was a young man wearing a white coat and holding a white sword.

The other was a boy wearing a black T-shirt and black school uniform pants.

The young man had a cigarette in his mouth and blew out some smoke.

“Hey, Hiba. You sure you don’t want to do any meaningless warming up?”

“Y-yes, Atsuta-san. I’m fine.”

“Is that so?” Atsuta rested the Cowling Sword prototype named Kusanagi on his right shoulder. “Then let’s get to 2nd-Gear’s renegotiation.”

“What are the rules?”

“Do we need any?”

Atsuta sounded like he was spitting out the contents of his heart.

He repeated “c’mon” several times while adjusting Prototype Kusanagi’s position on his shoulder.

A moment later, the air around Hiba suddenly grew clear and a certain phenomenon occurred.

He heard a pulsation.

The earth and the air that made up everything shook a bit around him.

From Hiba’s perspective, a tremor spread form his feet to his knees and shook his entire body.

…*Eh?*

As soon as he questioned it, the sensation vanished as if he had only imagined it.

“Wh-what was that strange feeling?”

“Oh, that was a side effect of Prototype Kusanagi’s cutting power.”

Atsuta let a smile show on his face.

“The earth and air are trembling in fear of the blade. …Don’t you get it? This isn’t like your fists there. Being handed something crazy like this is the true pleasure of being a swordfighter. But…”

He erased his smile and held Kusanagi forward in his right hand.

"It's a prototype and that cuts the fun down some. Listen, kid. I'll set a rule that's not really a rule, so I hope you're thankful."

"What is that?"

Hiba frowned and Atsuta clicked his tongue toward the sky.

"Y'see, a friend of mine made a prototype Cowling Sword like this once before. It had issues on the durability front, so it broke unexpectedly and got him a wife."

"I feel like you're omitting quite a bit there, but I take it a lot happened."

"I'm not omitting a damn thing! Why can't you figure it out from what I told you?"

*Why is everyone in UCAT like this?* wondered Hiba while hiding his misfortune behind a smile.

*…I'm not sure I can put up with how excitable this guy is. He's a lot like Sayama-san or Izumo-san.*

His worry was interrupted by Atsuta's annoyed voice.

"Three times."

He held up Prototype Kusanagi.

"After releasing its power three times, this Prototype Kusanagi will break. It's made that way so it won't cause any accidents, so…"

He rested the sword back on his right shoulder.

"If I don't cut you down in the first three attacks, 2nd-Gear loses. But if you can stop me, then it counts as your win. How about that!?"

"My win? But, um…!"

He had thought this was to help him train, but it had suddenly become an issue of life or death.

He gulped, forced strength into his stomach, and opened his tense throat.

"I-if we both fail, it won't resolve anything!"

"That's what a fifth-rate failure would say, you idiot!!"

That shout of anger seemed to stab through Hiba as he made excuses.

"In a fight, killing your opponent or stopping them are the only options, little monkey! The only people who start talking about failing are the lukewarm one's who don't want to do either. Lukewarm's only any good when you want to soak some squid for

drying!!”

Atsuta used his left hand to press a finger against his own head and moved it in a circle.

“Listen, idiot! Is there anything at all in your head!? Any brains!? Then is there anything in your stomach!? If you don’t have any guts in there, you won’t even make third-rate! And if you can do that, you should at least be able to be cut down by me and lose!”

“Third-rate? Fifth-rate?”

Hiba searched his memories.

He remembered being unable to protect Mikage the night before and he remembered Tatsumi’s laugh.

*…She called me weak.*

“Then are you first-rate!?” he asked.

“I’m a sword god, stupid. Why are you trying to measure me by human standards?”

Atsuta’s voice gave Hiba a chill even in the wintery air.

And it came from behind him.

“…!?”

*…The Art of Walking!?*

The man had vanished in front of him and the voice had come from behind him. That meant he had used more than just the Art of Walking.

*…He moved really fast.*

“C’mon now. Don’t misjudge me, little monkey.”

The shadow on the ground had Kusanagi raised to the upper right.

“Recite a poem, kid. A death poem. I’m always singing, right? Make it something like that.”

“But I can’t do something that, um, tricky on such short notice…”

“Don’t bother praising me, idiot. You don’t have to give it much thought. Just say whatever’s on your mind.”

Hiba thought and spoke the first thing that came to mind.

“Heh heh heh. C’mon, stop. It’s not like I’m a young girl of fifteen.”

Immediately afterwards, a great roar ran through the sky.

●

The deep sound travelled through the sky.

It reached some newly prepared land one level lower than the

source of the sound.

The prepared land was raised slightly above the surrounding forest, a blue tent was set up there, and two men sat on a mat laid out in front of the tent.

One was an elderly man in a navy blue Japanese outfit and the other was a young man in a lab coat.

The young man looked through his glasses to view the source of the sound through the mountain forest.

“Oh, sounds like it’s begun. I asked you for help setting this up, so what do you think of the fight, Hiba-sensei?”

“How does it look to you as a military god, son of Kashima?”

“Well…” Kashima smiled bitterly and realized what Ryuutetsu had said. “Son of Kashima? Do you know my father?”

“We’re field buddies. Especially since last month when our idiots went at it with Chao’s idiots.”

He looked to the tent behind him and the recently levelled earth there.

“My house was blown away pretty spectacularly. I came back from the field and found it gone. Toshi was so confused she tried to hit me with a hoe. …After that, your parents and the others around there shared a lot of food with us. Those squashes were really good when cooked.”

“Th-those were grown by my wife. I imagine they were quite good.”

“Yeah, they had a really nice flavor.”

“Yes, they would have. I remember Natsu-san saying she had given my portion to someone in need. …So it was you that stole a portion of my happy family life! Give back those squashes! Please give them back!”

“Why did you even come over here?”

Kashima hung his head, sighed, and opened the laptop sitting next to him.

“Ahh, ahh. I hope your grandson will be okay.”

“Don’t make that sound so forced. And are you sure that first attack didn’t already kill him?”

“I don’t know. Whatever the case, I hope he can get out of this with no regrets.”

“Fat chance of that. …Ryuuji’s too soft.”

Ryuutetsu lay on his side and Kashima asked him a question.

“That would be a problem for both of us. But are you serious about that?”

Kashima showed the old man his laptop monitor.

The window only showed a gentle pulsation on a horizontal line graph.

“That sound wasn’t from the Prototype Kusanagi.”

He remained expressionless but turned toward the mountain forest.

“Well, I’ll be hoping he puts all of his effort into this.”

●

Hiba swung his body back and to the right as if twisting it and then stopped moving.

He had made a backwards jab with his right elbow.

He aimed directly below where he had heard the voice. He lowered his hips and twisted his feet to send the strike directly into Atsuta’s solar plexus.

The roar of the attack was the combination of his foot stomping on the ground and his elbow striking.

He had chosen his elbow for attack.

A surface attack would not penetrate the anti-shock ability of Atsuta’s combat coat. The wider the surface, the more the impact would disperse and grow dull.

The end of an elbow was sharper and thus more powerful than the surface of a fist.

*…And I won’t turn around, so it can catch Atsuta-san off guard.*

It was the very first attack, the enemy was behind him, and he was being treated like a weakling.

All of that increased the odds of success for a rear attack.

And the attack had indeed succeeded.

Hiba felt the blow land perfectly.

However, he heard a voice from above and behind his head.

“The hell was that?”

It was Atsuta’s voice.

The vibration of the voice passed through Atsuta’s stomach and Hiba’s elbow.

Hiba felt that vibration coming from his elbow.

*…It isn't…stopping?*

"Are you even listening?"

Even after the question ended, the vibration coming from Atsuta did not stop. In fact, it grew stronger.

Hiba realized this was not the vibration of a voice or of pain.

*…This is anger.*

"Did you really think that puny elbow would work on me?"

Hiba's elbow felt something other than the vibration. It was a compact sensation much like a weight or pressure.

Atsuta was disappointed in the attack, his body trembled in anger, and he built up pressure in his body.

Hiba reflexively turned around and took a step back to check on the man.

Atsuta's eyebrows were raised, he was looking straight forward, and he had a smile on his lips.

No, it was not a smile at all. His face twisted as he gathered strength and it simply resembled a smile.

"Just so you know, if that was your full strength, then none of your attacks will work on me."

So…

"Just let me cut you three times and then scatter in the wind!!"

This time, a true roar shook the air.

●

The Prototype Kusanagi produced silence.

After swinging the sword, Atsuta initially felt something fire from the blade.

*…The hell was that?*

Normally, a Cowling Sword cut using the power of the concept contained within. When swung, it would either emit the power from the blade or have it reside in the blade.

But the Prototype Kusanagi was different.

As a sword god, Atsuta could become one with a sword when he swung it, so he understood.

As the strike descended, it created more than mere concept power.

*…Energy.*

But this energy did not surround him like an aura.

Like murderous intent or one's gaze, it continued on and on into the distance.

*…Shit.*

*This thing's dangerous,* he realized.

He came to an instinctual understanding of how Kusanagi worked.

It was unlike a normal Cowling Sword.

The difference came in the instant after swinging it.

*…Kashima!! What was that son of a bitch thinking!?*

*Not even he could use this Cowling Sword,* he thought.

*…This Cowling Sword isn't a sword at all. This Prototype Kusanagi isn't a sword at all!*

It did not produce power from its blade.

*…Swinging it intimidates the surrounding space itself into becoming a sword!!*

The ruler's sword filled the world with fear and then cut through it.

A moment later, Kusanagi activated.

Instead of sending a cutting power along the path of its gaze, it brought its own presence there.

It did not matter what stood in its way, whether it was the air, the earth, or anything else. Not even sound, light, or empty space was an exception.

Kusanagi's might shot through the area that was filled with its energy.

"————!!"

Atsuta's arm trembled.

The hand on the hilt shook, his muscles distorted, and his flesh leaped like splashing water.

*…Whoa!*

He could become one with a sword, but Kusanagi was too powerful a blade even for him.

The hilt and blade before his eyes was only Kusanagi's temporary form. The gaze it sent out was where the true Kusanagi would appear.

His right hand trembled violently. It was almost jumping around or undulating.

The idea was simple. Kusanagi's presence was so great that it was sending recoil back into his arm.

This sword was too great for even a sword god to hold it one-handed.

*…I see.*

Atsuta realized why Kashima had given him this sword.

As a military god, he had created a sword that only Atsuta, a sword god, could use properly.

*…Are you trying to turn me into your sword!?*

"If that's how it is…!"

Atsuta placed his left hand on Kusanagi as it raged at the bottom of its swing.

He pressed in from the left to suppress his shaking right hand and a powerful smile reached his lips.

"Then I've gotta use this thing right!!"

With that yell, he squeezed Kusanagi in his grip.

"Ahh!"

With a shout of focus, he lowered his hips a little, and worked to restrain the struggling blade. As a sword god, he instantly grabbed the hilt like a man is meant to wield a sword.

"————!"

As soon as Kusanagi stopped trembling, a cutting blast covered an area of several hundred meters ahead of him.

It looked like it was suddenly placed inside the scenery, but the earth was instantly torn up, the air was split apart, and explosions filled it all.

The forest and slope were swept aside and felled with a sound resembling surging waves more than a roar.

It all happened in an instant and Atsuta let out a breath once it was over.

"Now this is interesting!!"

A figure adjusted his two-handed grip on Kusanagi.

He relaxed his entire body, raised Kusanagi without any excess movement, and stepped forward.

He moved toward a boy lying on the ground.

It was Hiba.

The previous attack had been aimed at the boy, but he had only been blown away by the after effects since Atsuta had not known how Kusanagi activated.

He had missed.

A normal Cowling Sword emitted concept power or cut with its blade.

But Kusanagi required a proper intent to cut on the wielder's part.

Atsuta realized that Kusanagi was not a sword that obeyed a sword god. It was a sword on the same level as a sword god.

So if that sword god wielded it halfheartedly, it would only manifest itself halfheartedly.

That was what had happened just now.

If Kusanagi had truly activated…

*…Everything along the line of its gaze would have transformed into cutting power as I swung Kusanagi.*

This Cowling Sword could only be wielded by a sword god and it manifested itself in accordance with that sword god's will.

*…This isn't cutting with the power of a concept. It's more like cutting with your own gaze.*

He was now directly connected with a blade that could cut through even a dragon.

Atsuta expressed that feeling as follows:

"This is what I call interesting."

He sensed movement seven meters ahead.

In the shower of scattering fragments of crust, a boy slowly stood up.

He was gasping for breath, covered in sweat, and trembling.

But Atsuta's thoughts made a 180 when he saw Hiba.

*…How boring.*

His interest was in Kusanagi, not in Hiba.

The best part about this prototype Cowling Sword was its power and the fun of using something so hard to control, but…

*…It does have a weakness, too.*

He had to check on that.

However, he still had this match to take care of, so…

"Hey, little monkey."

He addressed Hiba who somehow managed to get to his feet.

"…"

He was too out of breath to reply, so Atsuta began to move.

He used the Art of Walking to vanish from Hiba's eyes.

"Hey."

The very next moment, Atsuta had moved up to Hiba and lifted the boy up by the collar of his T-shirt.

“——————!?”

Atsuta saw him shrink back in surprise as he dangled down.

Whether from the previous impact or from fear, there were tears in the corners of the boy’s eyes. They filled Atsuta’s heart with disgust.

*…Pathetic.*

“Listen up, you. …Just lose this thing already.”

Hiba’s eyes opened wide and Atsuta wondered what there was to be so surprised about.

“I had decided to take you on, but Kusanagi here’s way more interesting than you. So lose this thing already. I’ll let you off if you bow down to me. …It’s better than dying, isn’t it?”

“I…I can’t do that,” quietly said the boy.

It sounded like an excuse and Atsuta felt his heart cool.

*This ain’t good,* he thought of himself. *It’s fine when I’m excited. I try to enjoy things with my opponent then.*

*…But…*

Things changed when he got oddly calm like this.

Even as he wished he could regain his excitement, he could tell his eyes were narrowing.

*…This is hopeless.*

The boy dangling before his eyes was trembling in fear of what he might do.

*…This guy’s hopeless.*

“Know your place.”

*Oh, I’m pretty cool when I’m criticizing people. But this still ain’t good. This is where I’m supposed to lecture him. I’m supposed to yell at him, hit him, and give a good punch.*

*This really ain’t good. Don’t think like that. It won’t lead anywhere good. It isn’t like the Great Atsuta at all.*

*This guy’s nothing. He stood up to me, thinking he’s some kind of big-shot, but one attack later and he’s flinching back. He’s this close to me, but he isn’t doing anything other than watching to see what I’m gonna do. He’s that pathetic.*

*Don’t tell yourself you don’t want to fight him. You know that won’t end well.*

*…But I don't want to fight him anymore.*

*Didn't I just say not to tell yourself that?*

*Yeah, that's right.*

*Sigh, tilt your head, and look down on him. This is when Ryouko would've stopped you in the past.*

"Apologize."

He opened his mouth.

"If you won't apologize for yourself, I'll give up on you as the most pathetic of the pathetic who can't apologize for being weak or even really reach the level of being 'weak' in the first place. How about it?"

He paused.

"I'll give you five seconds. Five."

Once he said that, something appeared before his eyes.

Realizing it was a fist, he caught it.

He used his forehead to stop the fist Hiba swung at him.

The blow landed, producing a nice reverberating sound, but Atsuta was a sword god at the moment and that alone nullified any human attack. This attack was no different from the elbow from earlier. Plus, an attack thrown while dangling in midair was not going to be very effective.

"Four."

A leg arrived and that movement seemed to signal the beginning.

"…!"

A fist arrived, then a chop, an elbow, and a knee.

The attacks hit his head, his neck, his shoulder, his side, his gut, his crotch, and his vitals.

But none of it did anything.

"Three."

As Atsuta counted down, Hiba continued his meaningless attacks like a child.

*That idiot,* thought Atsuta as a chill filled his mind. *He's crying.*

*…He really is stupid.*

This was no time for sympathy and Atsuta had no intention of showing any. This boy had agreed to fight a sword god.

Despite the difference in strength between a god and a man, he had set foot into this arena where he could easily die.

The boy had misjudged what that meant.

He had completely failed to realize he would be blown away by the very first attack or just how much damage it would do.

Most likely, his body was recalling another incident.

*…His defeat from last night.*

He had been knocked away by a god of war and slammed to the ground.

That was much like being hit by a car and his body remembered that damage in the form of fear.

"Two."

Atsuta could feel the boy trembling, but it was not caused by his present fear. It came from the fear of the damage he had received the night before and from the realization that the one he cared for had been injured.

With his wounds healed, he must have assumed he had forgotten that fear.

*…But his body remembers when he received similar damage.*

"Ah!"

Hiba's strikes and kicks no longer had any proper form.

Tears flowed down his face and his mouth opened as he sobbed.

His movements were nothing more than protests at the fact that his strength was hopelessly insufficient.

*Does it seem unfair?* wondered Atsuta. *But you're the one at fault here.*

After all, he had lost the night before and had yet to shake off that fear.

"One."

Atsuta sank down so he could toss Hiba into the air and immediately swing Kusanagi down at him.

But he still spoke to this pathetic enemy.

"If you're gonna hate anyone for this, hate yourself. This was your fault for not realizing how weak you are."

And…

"Zero."

●

Just before the final number was given, Hiba stopped moving.

*…Weak…*

Tatsumi had called him that the night before and this opponent

had done so again.

*Yes,* he agreed while relaxing his arms and legs.

*…I really am weak.*

He also relaxed his clenched jaw and felt tears spill down his cheeks.

What was this? Whatever the result, there was nothing he could do.

*…But I still don't like it.*

He did not like it, but he had to accept it. He had no way of changing it, so that was his only option.

*…But if I had more strength, it wouldn't have turned out like that!*

The words "what if" entered his mind.

But there were no "what ifs" when it came to the past.

He knew that. He knew it, but he still did not like it. And that regret definitely did exist in his heart.

So he thought about what to do to keep himself from feeling that regret again.

*…What if I could get stronger?*

Instead of thinking about the past, he turned his "what if" toward the future.

What if? What if he could rid himself of his weakness?

*…No.*

His attacks were of no use against the sword god before his eyes. No matter how strong he grew, there were some things he could never overcome.

*I am weak,* he told himself. *Even if I grow stronger, I'll still be weak.*

Even with the help of Susamikado and Mikage, he was only borrowing their strength and he had no more strength than any other human living in the real world.

*That's right,* he realized. *Then no matter how hard I work, I'll still be weak.*

But in that case…

*…Isn't that perfectly normal? Then why?*

Why?

*…Why is everyone acting like I'm not allowed to try and fight when I'm still weak!?*

If he could be strong when wielding a great power or weapon, wasn't that enough?

"_____"

He did not even hear Atsuta speak the final number.

But he did hear the word in his heart.

*…That isn't right!*

He did not know what was not right or how it was not right, but he knew that it was not.

Once, a white god of war had made a pursuit and fought despite being outmatched.

An American UCAT mechanical dragon unit had fought a large black mechanical dragon. Hiba's own upperclassman and a girl younger than he was had even fought the dragon.

And another of his upperclassmen would face enemies of any number or any size with nothing but a pair of wings and a spear. Yet another upperclassman would confront his enemies while declaring his righteousness and without carrying a single weapon.

That was why it was not right.

It was not right to remove him from the battle just because he was weak.

One could be removed from the battlefield when…

*…When they let out a scream and run away.*

The others did not do that.

And the night before, he had held the person who mattered most in his arms to the very end.

He was afraid. His entire body was still experiencing a refrain of the impact and noises of Typhon's strike.

*…But I didn't do that! I didn't let out a scream!!*

That transformed into another sentence inside him.

He fought *because* he was weak. And he announced what that meant in his heart.

*…That's what you call struggling!!*

●

Atsuta finished his countdown and prepared to throw Hiba into the air.

But…

"!?"

Before he could instruct his hand to move, his fingers reflexively let go of the boy's collar.

*…What?*

He felt pain. A stabbing pain filled his left thumb.

He looked down and saw a chunk of flesh bitten out of the thumb's base.

"Oh!" he said in surprise before realizing what had happened.

Hiba had kicked off his arm and, when he landed in a crouch, he spat something to the side.

*…C'mon, really?*

*That's as part of my body.*

*Don't be tearing that off and throwing it away. Aren't you going to at least give it back?*

But at the same time, Atsuta felt a slight strength pulling up on the corners of his mouth.

*…C'mon, really?*

*What do you think you're doing, me?*

"Hey!!"

He held Kusanagi tightly in both hands and raised it overhead.

And he literally jumped toward his prey.

*…Now this is getting interesting!!*

●

Hiba could tell he was trembling.

*…I'm afraid.*

He had acted on a sudden impulse much like anger, but fear had taken ahold of his body.

Just a slight graze from that sword's attack had pummeled his entire body, so a direct hit would end this immediately.

It had been the same the night before. He had only survived because Tatsumi had not really seen him as her opponent. She must have only been after 3rd-Gear's Concept Core.

He felt she had implied he was not even worth killing.

*…But I need to stop her.*

Tatsumi was his Top-Gear counterpart and she claimed to have killed his father.

That made it his duty to stop her and those working with her.

He had to stop her no matter what.

It did not matter if he was afraid, if he was pathetic, if he was tossed through the air, or if he could not move.

He had to stop her regardless.

This was the same. The attack was preparing to drop down before him.

*…What should I do?*

He had no power and his attacks could not reach his opponent, but that did not necessarily mean he could not stop the man.

*…So I can't give up here!*

He always had the strength known as Mikage by his side. That gave him access to striking power, piercing power, weight, speed, defense, flight, size, beauty, and coolness.

He did not have any of that now. All he had was…

*…My own way of fighting!*

He had been taught not to rely on the god of war as he fought and he had been taught to assume the battle never came to an end.

The sun king and moon princess had taught him to fight to his very limits and the youngest of the four dragon brothers had taught him strength was independent of size.

He refused to believe he had not gained anything from those battles.

He lifted his trembling body, starting from the back, and leaned forward.

He almost toppled forward, but he could form a running stance by moving his knees forward.

"Oh…"

He kicked off the ground behind him.

"Ohhh!!"

He charged toward Atsuta with enough force to leave behind his shaking.

He did have some things: speed, his short frame, and the combat techniques passed down by the Hiba family.

Altogether, those gave him overwhelming mobility.

His low weight and height did not put much force behind his attacks, but he was second to none in speed and quick turns.

His opponent was a sword god. A military god might have been able to keep up with him, but…

"———!"

As he ran, he tilted to the right and jumped.

He shot past Atsuta to the right.

The man had yet to swing Kusanagi.

As Atsuta started to turn around, Hiba twisted his body.

To throw a reverse roundhouse kick, he turned his body by 180 degrees as he ran.

Kusanagi caused the earth to pulsate below his feet.

The sword's tremor filled the wind.

A tremor of fear remained in his body. If he let down his guard for even a moment, he would be assaulted by the phantom sound and pain of the blow he had taken the previous night.

He just barely made it. He felt like he was running on the edge between himself and the world.

As soon as he spun around, he leaped right, which was to Atsuta's left as he turned around.

Atsuta was right-handed, so the raised sword was tilted to the right.

By jumping to his left, Kusanagi's strike would reach Hiba slightly later.

"————!!"

Hiba lowered down and poured all of his strength into his body. And he used it all to turn around.

But the sword god made his move.

Atsuta used a simple method of swinging Kusanagi more quickly.

While facing straight toward Hiba, he got down on his left knee.

By lowering his body, he sped up Kusanagi's fall by that much more.

"!?"

Atsuta's decision surprised Hiba, but it did not matter.

Hiba bent back and to the right before jumping into the air. He swung his arm and leaped as if trying to lean back and pass through the pulsation shaking the air.

Immediately afterwards, Kusanagi's strike arrived.

●

Atsuta watched Hiba.

*…He's a fast one!*

Not even a low level military god could move that fast.

Not even a mid level sword god would have been able to keep track of his movements.

But Atsuta worked alongside a top level military god and was a similar level of sword god himself.

He could follow Hiba's movements and he could predict what the boy was trying to do.

So he went down on one knee and swung his sword while planted solidly on the ground.

Kusanagi's energy shot out much like a gaze.

It was filled with intent to kill.

Atsuta twisted his arms and fired Kusanagi while feeling the delicious sensation in his entire body.

However…

"!?"

Something unexpected happened.

Kusanagi's intent to kill was deflected as he swung it down.

"What!?"

The feel of the sword told him Kusanagi's killer intent had gotten jammed in something that could stop a gaze.

That something was a fist-sized stone.

It had come from Hiba's hand.

Hiba had run and leaped while turning toward Atsuta, but he had also thrown a stone that had been exposed when Kusanagi tore into the ground earlier.

Hiba's speed and Atsuta's focus on Hiba himself had prevented Atsuta from noticing the stone.

Kusanagi's blade struck the stone.

*…Dammit!! I'm still not used to using this thing!*

He lost control and Kusanagi activated early. Its power sliced through the sky.

"———!!"

The scarlet sky was split for several hundred meters into the heavens.

The air rumbled and wind blew in.

Hiba ran through the descending scarlet wind as he circled toward Atsuta's kneeling back.

Atsuta stood up and took a quick step forward to move away from Hiba.

The movement of the wind told him what Hiba was doing.

*…This is getting interesting.*

He heard something a lot like a sharp blade, but it was Hiba picking up another stone.

He could tell Hiba was trying to win by having him activate Kusanagi a third time.

The boy was trying to stop Atsuta by doing that.

"This really is getting interesting!"

Atsuta turned forcefully around to face Hiba.

"If you can stop this blade, I'd like to see it!!"

Hiba spun around and charged in while Atsuta swung Kusanagi down toward him.

The boy was five meters away.

And that distance shrank as Hiba approached.

In an amount of time one could call an instant or a moment, Atsuta saw something.

Hiba had thrown a stone toward Kusanagi's raised blade.

It was a snap throw from the left hand rotated behind his back.

The throw took a parabolic arc from behind him and over his head.

If Atsuta had only been watching Hiba, he would not have noticed it.

But Atsuta saw it.

And so he switched his stance. He placed his left palm on the bottom of Kusanagi's hilt and pried the blade into a low position.

He also shifted his body to the left so Hiba would pass by to his right.

When Hiba did so, Atsuta would cut through him from below.

With Hiba's speed and Kusanagi's activation, Hiba's torso would be cleanly sliced in two.

Even if Hiba tried to attack, none of his blows would affect Atsuta.

Dodging was the boy's only option and the best he could do was take a wide circle around the man.

"This is over!"

Atsuta held Kusanagi like a bat and began to tilt the tip behind him.

At the same time, Hiba made his move.

He neither dodged nor made a meaningless attack.

“———!?”

Atsuta was briefly unable to react to Hiba’s action.

However, his reflexes as a sword god chose the most effective attack.

“Ohhh!”

A moment later, their clash came to an end.

●

In the forest below, Kashima looked up from in front of the tent set up on a raised area of land.

He was frowning a little.

“Is it…over?”

Next to him, Ryuutetsu stared up into the scarlet sky while still lying on the mat.

“It must be,” said the old man. “I don’t hear anything anymore.”

He sat up and rotated his shoulders to loosen them.

“How about we go check on them? They’ll get cold if we leave them there.”

●

Atsuta saw Hiba’s face so close that their foreheads were about to hit.

Hiba was smiling a little, his forehead was drenched with sweat, and he was not moving.

“Is he unconscious?” asked Atsuta.

He shook his head, clicked his tongue, and checked on their situation.

They were facing each other.

Atsuta held Kusanagi near his right shoulder with the blade thrust forward.

And Kusanagi had stabbed into its target.

That was Hiba.

Kusanagi’s blade had pierced the left side of the unconscious boy’s chest up to the hilt.

Atsuta had not done that.

“Did he run in and stab it into himself!?”

Atsuta realized what Hiba had done.

*…You idiot.*

Before the third attack, Hiba had not dodged or attacked meaninglessly.

He had chosen to accelerate.

He had moved almost too quickly for Atsuta to follow and ran right up to the man.

In that instant, Atsuta's training, characteristics as a sword god, and emotions had produced a single reaction.

He had counterattacked.

When holding Kusanagi like a bat, what was the quickest way to counterattack?

A thrust.

By dropping Kusanagi's tip forward, he had been able to attack the boy as he charged in at him.

He had acted on reflex and used the sword like a normal Cowling Sword.

By the time he had realized his mistake, it had been too late.

He had already realized what Kusanagi's biggest flaw was. He was not used to using it, so he had yet to fully grasp how to release its energy when it began to activate.

He knew how to release the energy for a slash. He had done that twice already.

But what about for a thrust?

*…Dammit.*

He had acted without thinking. As a sword god and expert swordsman, he had attacked almost subconsciously, so he had not focused and released the killer intent.

And thus, Kusanagi had not activated.

He had simply stabbed the blade forward like any other Cowling Sword.

Hiba had not hesitated as he charged in.

He had grabbed Kusanagi's blade with both hands and directed it toward the left side of his chest.

"He stabbed himself."

*…Is he stupid?*

Hiba's hands were now holding Atsuta's hands on the hilt.

And Kusanagi's entire blade had pierced through his body.

"———"

If Atsuta released Kusanagi's energy to slice through the boy's left shoulder, he could only cut either upwards or downwards.

That would not be enough to kill Hiba.

"You idiot."

Atsuta clicked his tongue again and took a step back.

He let go of Kusanagi. It now simply looked like Hiba had grabbed Kusanagi and stabbed himself in the chest.

He had lost consciousness, but he remained standing and the area below his chest was wet.

Seeing that, Atsuta pulled some gum from his pocket.

It was a high-class nicotine gum advertised as "monkfish liver flavor".

He heard footsteps from the forest behind him and put the gum in his mouth without turning around.

He reached for Kusanagi and grabbed it.

"Make sure to record this."

He spoke to the person behind him and swung Kusanagi downwards.

It cut through Hiba's left side and a red spray filled the air.

"———!!"

Lastly, the cut shot several hundred meters behind Hiba.

The attack roared and Hiba's unconscious form was knocked through the air.

"Atsuta!"

Kashima's voice reached him from behind, but Atsuta did not care.

He looked down to find Kusanagi broken in his hands.

"Looks like it broke right on schedule."

"Atsuta! The battle was already over! Why did you have to attack again!?"

Atsuta sat down without bothering to turn around.

He looked to where Hiba lay collapsed on the ground and held up the broken Kusanagi.

"I said I lose if I didn't kill him after three attacks, remember?"

Atsuta stood back up and tossed the remains of Kusanagi.

He heard them hit Hiba and roll away.

"You stopped Kusanagi, so you win. And I didn't kill you after three attacks, so I lose. …That clearly settles the wins and losses on

both sides.”

He laughed quietly and yelled into the scarlet sky.

“Why is this world so damn boring!?”

●

The colors of evening filled a city.

The city had a port and an inland sea to the west. This was the city of Sakai which contained the ports of Sakai and Osaka.

The city contained a slope with a residential area at the top.

Two people stood at the bottom of the residential area as the setting sun shined on it.

They were Sayama and Shinjou.

They both held documents or letters and they looked at the houses on the slope.

Shinjou pointed behind the row of houses toward the top of the slope.

“Um? If we follow this road, turn right, take that walking path, turn left, come out on top of the hill, and then take that road a while, we’ll be at our destination.”

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun. thank you for those directions that were even more indirect than I ever imagined. …You are so cute.”

“What you’re saying is too indirect and disconnected to have any idea what you mean!!”

Shinjou sighed and looked back up at Sayama with a look that seemed to say “anyway”.

“Can we get going, Sayama-kun?”

“Yes, we can, Shinjou-kun. …Let us continue to where you discovered your past.”

She gave a small smile and nodded, but quickly hid her smile behind her documents.

“I’ll have to show you everything I found here back when I came before you.”

“Of course. And when you say that, it sounds really dirty.”

“What is wrong with your ears?”

She sighed again and lowered her shoulders next to Sayama who was holding a handheld recorder.

“Honestly, if you like things like that, why not go somewhere that will do it for you?”

He nodded and looked her way.

“Are you sure you want me doing that?”

Shinjou groaned and stopped moving, but she finally answered.

“On second thought, no.”

“I would not want to either. Not if it was anyone other than you. And…”

He pulled on her hand and began walking up the sloped sidewalk.

“Ah.”

She was surprised by the tug on her hand and he turned back toward her.

“Now, it is time we got going. We can continue reading these documents on our way to our destination…on our way to where your mother was.”

“R-right.”

She hesitated but gave a definite nod. As if to say this would be okay, he gave her a refreshing smile and spoke.

“But I am a lucky man. Once we reach our destination, I get to see exactly where it was you ‘came before me’! Make sure to spread your legs!”

With a wordless smile, Shinjou took a running start and kicked the rear of the suit pants in front of her.

## Afterword

And that was Owari no Chronicle 6-A.

I'm not sure how to put it, but it feels like I've taken the story as far as it needs to go (because I can see the big picture as I write it). It's thanks to all of you that I have been able to write this to the very end. Thank you very much.

And with that, it's time for the usual chat.

"I'm not even sure why I'm asking anymore, but did you read it?"

"Sorry, I've been really busy at work recently."

"You just abandoned me, didn't you!?"

"Don't be stupid. Don't take a working man lightly. I've been so busy that I find myself collapsed and sleeping in the entranceway after getting home. And with the door still open, too. I only realized it the following morning. For some reason, the morning paper was sitting on top of me."

"That must have been a terrible surprise for the delivery man."

"Yeah, that delivery man's the kind of moron who suddenly opened the door to sell me something while I was cooking fried rice in the nude on a hot summer day. And then he ran off without even giving me his sales pitch. What was he even there for? Scouting out the place?"

"Do you have anything to say about *yourself* in that situation?"

"I made sure to put an apron on after hearing the knock on the door."

"Enough about how insane you are nowadays. Do you have a painful story about middle or high school?"

"Yeah. One hot day during summer break in my second year of middle school, I was lying in my room in only my underwear."

"Why do you strip at the drop of a hat? Is there something wrong with your brain? There is, isn't there?"

"Just listen. So I spotted a roach on the ceiling near the door. Just as I was thinking how hot the thing had to be, it flew right down at me. It went straight up the right leg of my underwear and into the darkness within. Ha ha ha. Scared the hell out of me."

"What an awful summer memory."

That's enough of that.

Anyway, my background music this time was Watanabe Misato's 10 Years. I think it's a great song and I've had it forever.

"Who is aware of the best resolution?"

That will do for this time.

The answer is right there.

September 2005. A morning with a typhoon blowing in.

-Kawakami Minoru

9784840232135

ISBN4-8402-3213-X

C0193 ¥770E

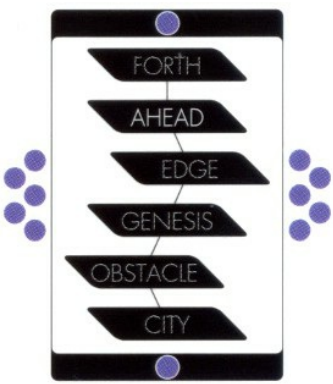
MediaWorks

発行●メディアワークス

定価：本体770円

※消費税が別に加算されます

1920193007701




The 1st.AHEAD